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ABSTRACT

A project studied use of assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) in admissions to part-time degrees and diplomas at the University of Kent at Canterbury (England, United Kingdom). The APEL course was highlighted in brochures advertising part-time degree, diploma, and Access courses. Interviews with 40 applicants explained APEL and assessed their ability to benefit from the intensive, "fast-track" option. The nine participants had achieved success, were upwardly mobile, were becoming more aware of themselves and their abilities, and wanted more actively to determine the course of their own lives. Admissions tutors most likely to deal with APEL students were interviewed to introduce the project, to establish what criteria they considered important when selecting adults for degree and diploma courses, and to establish what kind of portfolios the tutors might want from would-be students. A 4-day course was developed that incorporated the following: (1) study, writing, and analytical skills; (2) group dynamics; (3) identification of prior achievements and future needs; (4) practice in basic tools of academic survival; and (5) a portfolio. Admissions tutors were interviewed again after APEL was completed. The intention was to use the interviews to reflect on the project, but this proved impossible since some tutors who interviewed students were not those originally interviewed. A questionnaire administered to all participants showed APEL was an important experience. (Appendixes include the survey instruments. Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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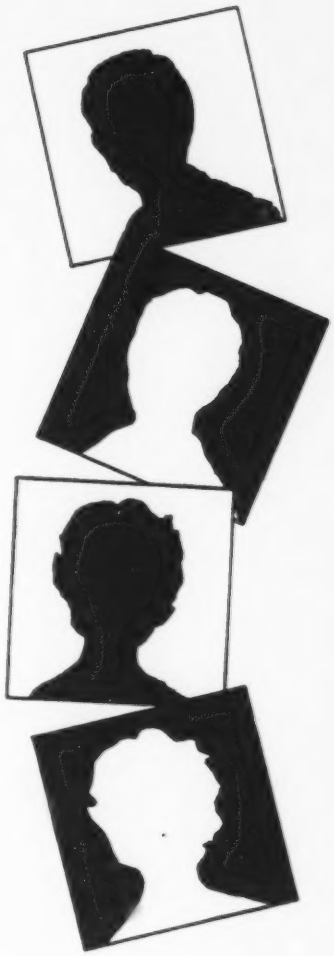
THE ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN UNIVERSITIES' ADMISSIONS PROCEDURES



Linden West and Wilma Fraser

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THE ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN UNIVERSITIES' ADMISSIONS PROCEDURES

REPORT OF A PILOT STUDY BASED IN THE SCHOOL OF CONTINUING EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF KENT AT CANTERBURY

Linden West and Wilma Fraser,

Unit for the Study of Continuing Education,

School of Continuing Education,

University of Kent at Canterbury,

January, 1992.

FOREWORD

This report provides an account of the use of the assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) in admissions to part-time degrees and diplomas at the University of Kent at Canterbury. The project was one of six pilot schemes designed to encourage the development of APEL in British Universities organised under the auspices of the Learning from Experience Trust and financed by the Department of Employment.

Although the project at Kent was relatively small scale it was designed as an intensive piece of action-research. The process of establishing an APEL programme, from student recruitment through the development of an APEL course to student selection, was evaluated at every stage. Everyone involved, students and tutors, was extensively interviewed. We believe therefore that the analysis of the process will be of interest to a wide audience of people concerned to facilitate greater access to higher education.

We would like to thank the University of Kent admissions tutors who co-operated with the research and the students who were willing to share their thoughts and feelings so openly and honestly. Thanks also to Judith Hattaway, Mandy Riley, Dorothy Goldman (who corrected some of the material), Mary Calthrop (who provided administrative assistance and took responsibility for overseeing the production of the final report) and to the national APEL project manager, Anthony Turner, from Middlesex Polytechnic.

Finally, we should be made clear that this work was produced under contract with the Department of Employment. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Employment or of any other government department.

Linden West and Wilma Fraser
Canterbury.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Linden West is Lecturer in the Theory and Practice of Continuing Education at the University of Kent at Canterbury and helps to run a newly established Unit for the Study of Continuing Education based in the School of Continuing Education. He worked formerly for the WEA and acted as a Consultant to Oxfordshire County Council in devising an access strategy.

Wilma Fraser is a Tutor-Organiser for the WEA's South Eastern District. She has been responsible *inter alia* for the development of Making Experience Count courses in the District. Wilma has recently been commissioned by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education to write an account of this work which will be published at the end of 1992.

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1 INTRODUCTION: APEL AT KENT, AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT.

New routes into higher education (HE) have become familiar in recent years through the extension of mature student entry schemes and the growth of Access courses. Such developments reflect the growing acceptance within HE of alternative forms of preparation for higher education to conventional A-levels.

One expression of more flexible attitudes has been the growing understanding that mature students can develop the skills, attitudes and knowledge to succeed in higher education in highly informal ways. Individuals with no or minimal paper qualifications may have acquired the attributes needed to prosper in their studies by other means. They may, for example, have managed a voluntary agency and have researched and prepared papers for committees as part of their job or have pursued an academic interest, independently, over a number of years. Adults like these have entered and prospered in HE, despite the absence of formal qualifications.[1]

Some HE institutions have gone further than assessing applicants' experience simply for admissions and have established mechanisms to accredit their informal learning, wherever appropriate, towards a first degree. The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) has become a label to describe a range of procedures by which learning is assessed for purposes of admission to, or credit exemption within, degree schemes. Assessment can be undertaken as part of an extended interview or through the medium of a course. APEL modules have even been incorporated into some degree programmes; learning may be assessed in a class, individual tutorials or a combination of these elements.[2]

APEL has been accepted faster in polytechnics and colleges than universities. For one thing the former's local authority roots made them more sensitive to issues of local accountability such as access than was the case with universities. Similarly, notions of accrediting work-based learning came more easily to institutions with a commitment to vocational and applied forms of education. The recent rapid growth of APEL may also reflect the success of various pilot schemes, sponsored by the Learning from Experience Trust (LET).[3] Money was provided to support the development or extension of APEL, in different forms, in a range of institutions which probably served to legitimise the concept within the system as well as demonstrate its practical utility.

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[1] See, for example, Susan Warner Weil, *Making Sense of Experiential Learning* (SRHE/Open University Press, 1989).

[2] See Norman Evans, *The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning, Report of a CNAA Development Fund Project conducted at the Learning from Experience Trust* (CNAA Development Services Publications 17, 1988).

[3] Ibid.

The success of such pilot projects in the old public sector of HE prompted the Trust to attempt a similar initiative in the universities. Money was secured from the Department of Employment to support six projects which it was hoped would demonstrate the contribution APEL could make to the selection and, where appropriate, the accreditation of older learners across a number of universities, faculties and disciplines.

This report is an account of one such 'pilot' project at the University of Kent at Canterbury (UKC). APEL at UKC was offered as part of the admissions process for part-time degree and diploma courses. The idea was to develop a distinct dimension to the national scheme by offering APEL on *'a student-led basis, working to their priorities and perceptions, not those of the institutions'*.[4] At least, that was the intention.

It should be noted that the pilot was restricted to the part-time programme. It was felt unrealistic, at this stage, to contemplate introducing APEL into the admissions process for full-time degrees. Kent is the second most popular university for conventional applicants and while there is some commitment to mature student access, the University's popularity makes it difficult to promote the idea among certain academics and admissions tutors. 'Why bother?' they ask when traditional applicants are in plentiful supply. Notwithstanding, it was hoped that the APEL pilot in the part-time programme might stimulate interest and developments elsewhere in the University in areas such as science where the number of conventional applicants is less buoyant.

Candidates for APEL at UKC would be selected from among applicants to the part-time degree/diploma and access programmes administered by the School of Continuing Education (SCE); those chosen would work with a tutor, in a highly supportive environment, to identify and evaluate their prior learning and relate it to the competencies required in the study of their chosen subjects at degree-level. Students would be given the opportunity to reflect on what they had learned and its relationship to what admissions tutors said they looked for in, and wanted from, older students.

The project required the APEL tutor to work intensively with a group of students for 20 hours prior to the closing date for applications to the part-time degree, diploma and Access programmes. 20 hours reflected the availability of grant aid from LET as much as any education rationale but was, nonetheless, considered a reasonable period of time, when combined with independent study, to produce a portfolio. Each student was to complete a portfolio delineating those aspects of their experience, formal and informal learning, thought relevant to higher education.

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[4] APEL/LET Project Proposal from the School of Continuing Education, University of Kent.

Definitions of relevance would, in part, derive from interviews with admissions tutors focusing on the skills, attitudes and knowledge they considered important in equipping people for HE. The students completing APEL would be guaranteed either a place on the part-time degree/diploma course of their choice, or, if this was academically inappropriate, on an access course. APEL was to be offered free to maximise access to the pilot scheme.

It is important to appreciate that the SCE administers a substantial programme of degree/diploma and access courses. There are currently 410 students in 21 degree and diploma schemes. Courses are available in French, the Humanities (History, English, Philosophy), Archaeology, Philosophy, Alcohol Counselling, Social Science, Comparative Literary Studies, Social Policy, Social Psychology, Sociology and Psychology, Theology, Women's Studies, Continuing Education, Counselling Skills, Ecology, English Literature, History and Development of Garden Design, Local and Modern History and Italian. Moreover, there are 66 students enroled on Access courses within the School, as part of a wider network of Access opportunities in the county involving some 800+ students.[5]

The Kent pilot was designed as an intensive piece of action-research. Each stage of the process was to be closely monitored, and everyone involved with the scheme interviewed at various times. Action-research has been defined as a *'small scale intervention in the functioning of the real world, usually in administrative systems, and the close examination of the effects of such interventions.'*[6] This is what we attempted at Kent: to offer a new opportunity for students while, at the same time, systematically assessing its impact on staff, students and the admissions process.

There were a number of distinct stages in the project and research process. First, all applicants for APEL were interviewed to assess their suitability by members of the project team.[7] Those selected were asked to complete a questionnaire to document their personal and educational histories as well as their reasons for seeking entry to higher education. The questionnaire had been developed as part of a wider study of the backgrounds and

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[5] The School hosts the Kent Access Consortium, the Authorised Validating Agency for the County.

[6] A.H. Halsey (ed), *Educational Priority: EPA Problems and Policies Vol 1, Report of a Research Project sponsored by the DES and the SSRC* (HMSO,1972) p.165.

[7] The project was managed by Linden West, Lecturer in the Theory and Practice of Continuing Education at UKC. Wilma Fraser, Tutor-Organiser with the WEA South Eastern District, was appointed as the APEL tutor and worked with Linden on all aspects of the project. The 'team' reported to an SCE Steering Committee.

motivation of Access students in Kent (see appendix 1).[8] Second, admissions tutors were interviewed about what they felt to be significant when selecting mature students for their discipline. They were asked to comment upon and prioritise from a list of competencies derived from an earlier LET study.[9] The interviews with tutors were recorded and the material transcribed and fed into the portfolio preparation process. Third, the APEL team organised a staff development day for admissions tutors, and other interested people, with the assistance of the national APEL project manager, Anthony Turner from Middlesex Polytechnic. The day was designed to disseminate information about APEL both nationally and at Kent, and to give people an opportunity to discuss the issues involved. Fourth, careful observation was made of the APEL process itself and the Kent project manager talked at length with the students. Fifth, admissions tutors were re-interviewed after they had seen the APEL students. The intention was to use the interviews to reflect on the overall project but unfortunately this proved impossible since some of the tutors who interviewed students were not those we had originally seen. As this report will show, the person responsible for student interviews can be changed at the last moment and students may be seen by someone with little knowledge of their portfolio. Finally, once the project was over and a new academic year begun, students were asked to complete an evaluation form (see appendix 8) covering all aspects of the APEL process. It was planned to supplement this material with a full group discussion but, in the event, it proved impossible to find a convenient date for everyone concerned.

The research focused on four issues within the APEL process, derived from a review of previous projects and the wider literature.[10] In the first instance, there is the difficulty of defining and agreeing the skills and experience most relevant to HE. There is no necessary consensus on this and academics may differ over what is required for successful study. Second, there is a set of pedagogic questions concerned with deciding the most appropriate ways to enable students to reflect on their experience and to translate what has been learned in a language suitable for an academic audience. Third, and relatedly, how to do this in sensitive ways without dismissing aspects of individual experience as unworthy because of its 'irrelevance' to higher education. After all, the purpose of APEL, at least in this context, was to distinguish only that learning thought appropriate to higher education. Other experience, however

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[8] This research was conducted by Mary Telford, as part of an ESF studentship. Her questionnaire was based on that used by Woodley et al in their study of adult learners, *Choosing to Learn, Adults in Education* (SRHE/Open University Press, 1987).

[9] LET, in association with the County of Avon Education Department, *Handbook for the Assessment of Experiential Learning* (Learning from Experience Trust, 1987). See appendix 7.

[10] See, for example, Robin Usher, 'Qualifications, Paradigms and Experiential Learning' in Oliver Fulton (ed), *Access and Institutional Change* (SRHE/OUP, 1989) pp. 65-81.

significant to the individual, might not count. Clearly if such distinctions are not handled with care damage may be done to unconfident people with unhappy memories of formal education as once more they end up feeling undervalued by the system.

And lastly, there is the difficulty of defining the form and length of a portfolio which, while doing justice to the complexity of an individual's experience, nevertheless presents information in a form easily digested by hard-pressed admissions tutors. This was to prove a central issue as the project unfolded.

The structure of this report follows the project and research chronology. Section 2 explains how APEL candidates were recruited, and the educational backgrounds and motivations of those selected. Section 3 analyzes the initial expectations and attitudes of admissions tutors; section 4 describes and evaluates the course. Section 5 details the follow-up interviews with admissions tutors and section 6 the students' evaluation of the process. The final concluding section includes a series of recommendations about the development of APEL in the University of Kent and the system more widely. Predictably, the paper concludes with the realisation that more work is needed, as is a greater commitment to access to higher education for adults, if APEL is to find a suitable niche in the 'older' universities. It is suggested that the pilot marks only one small step in what needs to be a major journey of institutional change.

2 RECRUITMENT: THE STUDENTS AND THEIR BACKGROUNDS.

The APEL course was highlighted in over 2,000 brochures advertising part-time degree, diploma and Access courses distributed throughout Kent. The aim of the project was: *'to help adults to identify those experiences in their life which have developed their academic abilities'*. The brochure gave examples of relevant experience such as informal learning gained at work, in pursuing a hobby, or in voluntary and community service. APEL was featured in an early morning programme on BBC Local Radio in January and was the subject of a presentation at the annual SCE Open Day held in March. There was also coverage of the project in the local press. The publicity stressed the fact that those selected would be guaranteed a place either on the part-time programme of their choice or on an Access course.

Of the 50 people who made enquiries 40 came for interview. The applications from the remainder suggested that they were unsuited to APEL, at least in the form it was being developed. Some had misunderstood its purpose while others needed to complete an Access programme before they could realistically contemplate degree-level study.

Individual interviews of between 20 to 40 minutes were held over a period of two weeks. The project manager and the APEL course tutor (or the SCE Access Co-ordinator) were present at each. The interviews had two aims: to explain APEL and to assess the applicant's ability to benefit from the intensive, 'fast-track' option on offer.

Twelve applicants were eventually selected. Decisions, in the main, were easy since many applicants decided for themselves that they needed to take an Access course rather than APEL. Many were uncertain about what they wanted to study and although they had applied for specific courses were unsure about the suitability of what they had applied to take on personal or occupational grounds. Most lacked confidence in the ability to study at the required level and some were impelled by a more generalised sense of inadequacy. Higher education was an obvious way to address feelings of personal deficiency but, at the same time, these applicants were uncertain about their ability to cope or whether HE was for the likes of them. In the circumstances, an Access course appeared a more sensible option for such applicants. It is important to mention that no-one to whom we wished to offer an APEL place chose Access instead.

Notwithstanding, most applicants could have benefitted from an APEL-type opportunity. All the individuals concerned would almost certainly have gained from the time and encouragement to reflect, in a supportive environment, on their experience and what had been learned alongside a systematic consideration of future options. Access courses, as currently designed, provide little opportunity for such systematic reflection on experience and insufficient attention may be given to counselling and guidance.

There is nothing new in these concerns. The need for more

adequate counselling and guidance for adults at all stages of returning to learn is the refrain of almost every study of second chance learning. Moreover, the interviews pointed to the desirability of developing more courses of a Making Experience Count kind, provided by the WEA and other adult education bodies, which make use of APEL methods.[11] The difference between them and the Kent pilot is that the former are not tied to specified outcomes; rather they create the opportunity for individuals to consider a range of options in an open ended way. Clearly there are large numbers of people who would benefit from such an opportunity if it was available.

It is hardly surprising that the APEL concept has such a wide potential relevance; after all, the importance of examining experience and reflecting on what has been learned is a well established truth in adult education circles. What is new in APEL is the development of more formal assessment, and more systematic ways of doing it, which can be applied to all levels of post-compulsory education and training.

However, APEL, of whatever kind, is still a novel idea to most adult learners. It should be said that our interviewees were unlikely to have responded to anything not specifically related to HE entry and advertised as such. Whatever their needs may be, the attraction was not APEL *per se* but the prospect of obtaining University entrance in a short period of time.

The final number of APEL students was reduced to nine by illness, a change of mind and a late return from holiday. Of these, one person was only able to attend one session because of holiday arrangements. Everyone 'selected' seemed relatively confident about which course they wished to study in the University. Three wanted to read English Literature and had applied for the Diploma course which is equivalent to Part 1 of the part-time degree programme and carries with it the option of transfer to Part 2 of the part-time Humanities or English Literature degrees. Four students opted for the Social Policy and Social Psychology Diplomas (equivalent in status to the Literature Diploma), one for Women's Studies and the other for a combined English Literature/Philosophy diploma as the first step towards a degree in the Humanities.

All participants, at the beginning of the APEL course, were given a semi-structured questionnaire to complete which was designed for use in a larger study of Kent Access students. The questionnaire focused on the personal, social and educational backgrounds of the students as well as their motivation. Regrettably, the time taken in questionnaire distribution, return and analysis excluded the chance of giving feedback to the students during the 20 hours of the course itself. It was intended to discuss some of the findings and conduct further interviews in the Autumn of 1991 but, as indicated, this proved

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[11] See Phoebe Lambert, 'The Assessment of Prior Learning: Curriculum Innovation', in *Assessing Prior Learning: Progress and Practices* (FEU, 1987).

impossible to arrange.

As well as details of personal and educational histories, the questionnaire probed student motivation through structured, semi-structured and open-ended questions. Students were given lists of statements offering reasons for wishing to enter HE and were asked to rank them in order of importance. They were also invited to write about 'ways in which Access or APEL was likely to be helpful' under the headings of 'personal development', 'educational' and 'professional'. They had the specific opportunity, and were encouraged, to add other comments if they wished.

Like Access students and adults on qualification-bearing courses more generally, the APEL participants were relatively young in comparison to adults in, for example, liberal adult education programmes.[12] Four were in the 26-35 age bracket and six in the 36-45 group. Only one was male, which is surprising given their substantial representation in qualification-bearing courses.[13] Revealingly, perhaps, four participants had been divorced, reinforcing findings from major surveys of adult returners that divorce or other major life crises may be significant factors in educational participation.[14] Two of the students described themselves as being in managerial occupations, two as housepersons, while the remainder classified their occupations as skilled or semi-skilled; one was unemployed. In the main the constituency was lower middle rather than working class, C1s rather than Ds or Es.

Everyone had known some success at school and half had stayed on after 16. All had gained O-level passes in a number of subjects although not everyone had done so at school.. Four students reported distinctions or good grades at O-level while the remainder described their marks as 'average'. With two exceptions, the students had participated in a range of post-school and adult education courses and six had acquired qualifications after school in relation to their careers or voluntary work. They had been active participants in formal and informal learning over a long period of time; most were able to complete lengthy lists of interests which included debating, music, drama and sport as well as adult education classes.

The experience of adult education was no doubt reflected in the response to a question about what they looked for in education. They wanted learning to be different from school with *'no indoctrination'*, *'no patronising attitudes'* and an environment in which *'an adult should have no need to enforce the right to*

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[12] A. Woodley et al, Op. Cit., provides an account of the most recent study in this field; also see Veronica McGivney, *Education's for other people; Access to Education for Non-Participant Adults* (NIACE, 1990) for a review of the wider literature.

[13] A. Woodley, Op. Cit.

[14] See Veronica McGivney, Op. Cit.

question'. Despite ignorance of APEL they anticipated and expected learning to be student-centred as well as to stretch and stimulate them.

What about motivation? Occupational factors figured prominently in most responses. Both managers said that they wanted to function at work more effectively and felt a degree would help them do so. One wanted to converse more confidently with a range of people while the other looked for more credibility with the hierarchy. Another person viewed acquiring a degree somewhat cynically and, perhaps, even angrily: *'I have learnt so much in the last few years by personal study - I have lectured school children and adults but without formal qualifications...it is very difficult to obtain a job/career'*. Someone else had acquired nursing qualifications and taken counselling courses but needed, as she put it, *'a sound background for professional social work qualifications'* which a degree would provide. One woman, with an active interest in archaeology, hoped to complete a degree in history after which she wanted to work as an educational officer for the Archaeological Trust.

Other reasons were of a more educational or personal kind. Two talked of acquiring *'in-depth thinking'* and an ability to *'analyze processes and procedures'*. A need to develop greater confidence and to gain more self-esteem were given as explanations by two women. Further reasons included the need *'to strengthen my mind, I am vegetating'*; *'to be more aware of what it means to be a woman'* and *'to stimulate my mind'*.

There was a persistent theme of needing or wanting to change either personally, professionally or both. Students were asked to rank a number of professional, educational or personal factors which prompted them to enter HE. The factors were ranked on a scale from 0 (not applicable) to 3 (most important). Most students indicated that change was desirable and that their motives, although clearly occupational, were deeply personal as well. One student, the man, was the exception: he considered the idea of personal and professional change to be inappropriate in his circumstances. It would have been interesting to probe his reasons and situation in depth.

As indicated, the desire to change was most often expressed in career terms. One student rated the need for change in this regard particularly highly. She was a divorcee who had subsequently re-married; her younger child was approaching secondary education and she felt strongly about her right to, and need for, a career. But it was also evident that for her, and others, HE was a means to personal re-appraisal and assertion too.

The data enable some general conclusions to be drawn about the students although, as in many surveys of this kind, more in-depth analysis is required. (Obviously, with this particular sample some of the issues were explored further during the course; see below). The data, in the absence of in-depth interviews, gave tantalising hints, if no more, of the types of people the

students were and the personal and social factors involved in their application to UKC.

The students, like other adult returners in qualification-bearing courses, have achieved success (relative, if not absolute) in initial and post-initial education. They are upwardly mobile which, paradoxically, often brings with it feelings of marginalisation and social discomfort, of being in transition between different occupational and social groups. Further mobility is considered desirable and possible, however problematic. Like women returners in other studies[15] the Kent students were becoming more aware of themselves and their abilities and wanting more actively to determine the course of their own lives. They were engaged, and had been for some time, in a deep process of personal and professional reappraisal. The reasons they applied for APEL may, at one level, have been to do with the prospect of speedy entry to the University but APEL may also have appealed because of the sense of an opportunity, however limited, to sustain them in this more profound endeavour.

[15] See, for example, Arlene T. McClaren, *Ambitions and Realisations, Women in Adult Education* (Peter Owen, 1985).

3 INTERVIEWING THE ADMISSIONS TUTORS, 1.

> *What comes to me is a slight surprise that this sort of thing hasn't been done long before now. When I think of the interviews with other social scientists, but also with humanities specialists, they can be tremendously unstructured or foolishly structured exercises...*
> (Interview with an Admissions Tutor, April 1991)

There were three objectives in mind when interviewing the admissions tutors most likely to deal with the APEL students. First, to introduce the project to them, both at UKC and nationally. Second, to try to establish what criteria they considered to be important when selecting adults for degree and diploma courses. This was to include detailed reflection on the competencies devised by Course Selectors in an earlier LET development project and used to select students for social science degrees. Although the list had been devised for students applying for social science, we nonetheless felt it would be useful as an analytical framework for reflecting on what might be needed in other disciplines. Third, in the light of the above, to establish what kind of portfolios the tutors might want from would-be students.

We interviewed five tutors as well as the SCE Access Co-ordinator at this stage, ie before the APEL course began. The Co-ordinator was helpful in that she was able to offer a detailed knowledge of the experiences of mature student applicants in general to UKC as well as an informed perspective on the criteria used by tutors in student selection. The tutors we interviewed covered literature, history, philosophy, social policy, social science and women's studies. The interviews, which lasted for about an hour, were recorded and fully transcribed and this section is derived from the material the process generated.

The critical comments quoted at the beginning of this section, while extreme, nonetheless serve to set APEL at Kent in context. Most people we talked to agreed that interviewing was sometimes conducted in a peremptory way and frequently had low priority against other demands on faculty time. In effect, if not intention, it was clear that wider access for adults was not a major concern in the University at large. While there was pressure from the UFC to increase numbers, particularly in the full-time programme, there were ample supplies of conventional, 18 year old, middle class applicants:

> *You might not get people to admit it but there are large numbers of candidates accepted basically on their (A-level) grades. All this means that the skill of interviewing mature students is thin on the ground....*

> *The ability to sort and sift a range of abilities has never been very great, and moreover there are many Boards of Studies who do not have any set of entry requirements in terms of anything other than A-levels spelt out.*[16]

While it is the case that academics committed to widening access often teach part-time courses and may thus be responsible for some student interviews, it is also true that those committed to the cause often struggle to encourage other colleagues to take the process of selecting 'non-standard' applicants seriously and to give it the time it needs. Exploring portfolios and experiential learning does not necessarily rank highly, for understandable reasons, when set against research or other demands on academics' time. Although, in the opinion of the Access Co-ordinator, UKC is neither better nor worse than other universities, comments such as these indicate that the wider access cause, and APEL, have a long way to travel if they are to be given the priority they deserve.

What were the criteria tutors used in selecting mature students without conventional qualifications? Everyone admitted uncertainty about what they did and anxieties about the interview as a selection tool. This was the first occasion most had been asked to reflect in detail on what they did and how they felt about it. As one tutor, a philosopher, put it: *'I find it very difficult to specify any very definite criteria. It is a quite intuitive judgement in the end.'* His prime concern was to identify those candidates most able to generalise and distinguish between specific questions and the larger issues that lie behind them. He also wanted people willing and able to examine critically their own assumptions and attitudes.

It was often difficult, he felt, to determine such qualities at interview. He looked increasingly to students who had taken an Access course as a way of assessing whether they were able to cope with written work, could analyze an argument or an idea or cope with academic life more generally. Two of the tutors, one a social scientist and the other a literature specialist, wanted students who could think on their feet as well as write. These tutors employed highly interactive methods in the classroom and were anxious to recruit people with the ability to trigger others' thinking through oral contributions.

It was felt useful, early in each interview, to refer to the list of competencies produced by the social science admissions tutors in Avon, as a way to focus the discussion. The list is divided into three general categories: 'handling information', 'presenting information', and 'arguments and analysis'. Each category is broken down into specific 'competency statements' such as an 'ability to retrieve information', 'to communicate it in written form' or 'to apply a theory to an issue or problem'.

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[16] Interview with the SCE Access Co-ordinator.

The Kent tutors were unanimous in highlighting the ability to argue a case and analyze material as the most important prerequisites. The literature tutor looked for something more precise: an ability to scrutinise a text and relate it to diverse theoretical positions. The philosopher thought the ability to understand particular theories and to relate them to a problem was the key to success: *'It is no use having relatively more technical study or learning skills if they don't have the general intellectual set that will enable them to study philosophy...it may be arrogant to say it but this is more crucial in philosophy than anything else...the whole thing depends on the capacity to examine the arguments and to structure and to assess them...there are no basic factual data in philosophy.'*

The literature tutor thought there were specific requirements in her discipline which might not apply in other subjects. Students needed the ability to understand a text quickly as well as sensitivity towards the language used. She quoted the case of two outstanding students, one a German woman, the other an Indian doctor. She thought, because English was their second language, that they were unusually sensitive to issues of style, form and language. She went on to pose a general question about whether particular skills and competencies are transferable between one activity or experience and another or can only really be acquired in the study of specific subjects. The tutor was agnostic about the answer but insisted, nonetheless, that experience *per se* did not equip people with what was required. An ability to think abstractly, or to apply a theory, was no guarantee of a good literature student in the absence of other qualities.

The Women's Studies Admissions Tutor thought a person's wider experience highly relevant to her programme. She was, however, concerned about aspects of APEL, primarily the danger of reducing complex experience to sets of crude competency statements. Students, she insisted, might easily be alienated by the language and process. She preferred to start from the fact that most students lacked confidence and needed to be encouraged to explore their experience, which could be painful and problematic. They needed sensitive help to relate what had been learned and experienced more generally to the skills required for studying for a degree.

On the other hand, she was conscious of the academic and personal demands the Women's Studies course made. The structure of the programme - involving students selecting from a range of options across faculty boundaries rather than following a discrete course with the same cohort throughout the period of their studies - meant that students could be isolated from each other and have insufficient peer-group support. In fact students constantly complained of being isolated and vulnerable as a result of this structure.

This position was unlikely to change, at least for the foreseeable future. As a result it was felt to be particularly important for prospective students to attend two interviews, the first advisory in which the problems and demands of study were

detailed. In the second interview students had to show that they were able to reconcile study with domestic or work responsibilities. She was anxious to stress that this should not be interpreted as sexist, merely an expression of the concern about the strains of study in such a context.

She also looked for evidence of *'enthusiasm, drive and commitment'* towards the subject matter itself. She asked applicants what they intended to do after finishing the course as a way of assessing this. She explored life and work skills more generally, partly as another way of establishing motivation, partly to demonstrate to the applicants (despite her reservations about lists of competency statements) that some skills and achievements are highly relevant to academic study. An interview would frequently take the form of an exploration of how women in business, for example, had acquired skills similar to those needed in HE. The major difficulty, she felt, was to convince potential students of the truth of this rather than them being carried away by exaggerated claims or false comparisons. She insisted that women, whatever their background, tend to dismiss themselves and their experience as inconsequential.

This particular tutor thought portfolios could usefully contain evidence of wider experience as a basis for dialogue of this kind. APEL could also, if done well, assist in the process of demystifying the academy as well as being a means to legitimise applicants' prior experience.

The other tutors, while recognising the possible relevance of different kinds of experience, preferred submissions from would-be students which were rather more discrete and focused. The philosopher wanted students to produce a piece of writing of no more than four sides. Ideally, it should demonstrate an ability to write with a clear structure rather than *'a series of reflections or responses.'* Likewise the literature tutor wanted written work with a precise narrative rather than *'everything I have ever thought about this particular text.'* This would be far more useful than *'being able to write a bibliography or complete a footnote or to prove that they have read four Shakespeare plays.'*

The social scientist added that students should also show a capacity to analyze disagreements between different theoretical positions while the historian was much less specific: *'A lot of them* [the students] *are not used to writing essays at all or putting their ideas down on paper. Anything that they have done in that respect would be a help on almost any subject. Putting ideas on paper is an ability more or less irrespective of what subject you are applying to do.'*

As can be seen the interviews suggested a markedly different purpose for APEL than the production of lengthy portfolios. The tutors wanted students to demonstrate the skills of textual analysis or writing in an analytical way rather than reflections on wider experience unless explicitly illustrative of such qualities. The tutors were uncertain about the relevance of wider

experience *per se* and looked to conventional pieces of writing as the basis for judgement. Portfolios were simply an unknown quantity to them. At this stage in the research there was an emerging contradiction between the aims of the project (portfolio preparation), the wider needs of the students (to be given time and space to reclaim parts of themselves and to work through what had been learned) and the more limited perspectives of sympathetic, committed, but sceptical tutors.

4 THE APEL COURSE.

Perceived as a *'fast-track'* into the part-time degree and diploma programme, the aims of the Kent APEL course were, by definition, circumscribed. The students had elected for particular degree and diploma courses, the relevant admissions tutors had provided guidance as to their requirements; the intention was to match what tutors wanted with the best that students could give; this would require eliciting students' competencies and expressing them in a language consistent with academic requirements.

The approach was in contrast to that of the less circumscribed Making Experience Count courses in which student reflection on experience can result in a number of possible outcomes: including further education, employment, a training course, or simply concluding that APEL is sufficient for now. Applying to HE is only one among many potential end-products.[17]

In comparison with the UKC project, such a structure allows great flexibility, despite the lack of any agreement with, or ownership by, an HE institution. Nonetheless, regardless of the tighter remit of the Kent project, we felt strongly that as much flexibility as possible was desirable including, crucially, applying a philosophy of self-directed learning in the group and enabling reflection on a range of experience. Partly this was an expression of the student-centredness of the project's terms of reference; and partly to create a culture of mutual assistance. These principles became an important part of the process and the ethos of the group. From the beginning it was believed that APEL should be much more than a 'crash' Access course on essay writing or textual criticism, important as these skills may be.

The value placed on group processes influenced course planning. APEL, as has been observed, takes many forms and whether a student works alone or in a group will depend, in part, on the resources of the institution concerned and the importance attached to independent learning as against group activity. The UKC course was conceived in group terms: while there are well-documented arguments in favour of individualised learning, the group approach was chosen because it provides an opportunity for students to learn from each other, to develop a sense of common purpose as well as feelings of mutual support and encouragement.

We considered that such mutual support and encouragement were critical factors to student success. In her paper: 'Access: Towards Education or Miseducation? Adults Imagine the Future', Susan Warner Weil has elucidated the sense of *'disjunction'* that often characterises the adult learner:

> *Disjunction can be associated with feelings of alienation, anger, frustration and confusion...it refers to a sense of fragmentation and involves issues*

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[17] See J. Storan, *Making Experience Count* (LET, 1987).

of both personal and social identity. [18]

Traditional learning environments, such as most conventional HE, are rarely seen to address the problem. However:

> *Alternatively, by chance, design or conscientious planning on the part of educators, disjunction can be constructively 'made sense of' and managed...an overall sense of integration itself in connection with academic learning programmes includes the following: the active use and appreciation of different forms of knowledge (e.g. experiential, tacit, practical, propositional), the making of connections across disciplinary boundaries, and a positive valuing and use of personal and social differences within a group.*[19]

Weil's research shows that women in particular value peer group support although this can sometimes be double-edged: dominant individuals may silence the less-confident and reinforce feelings of worthlessness and isolation in them. Nonetheless, the essence of APEL at Kent lay in the belief that learning is constructed primarily in relation to others,[20] and that the identification of prior achievements and future needs, as well as responding to the problems the process brings, are best done in a supportive group.

However, we were also required to respond to what the admissions tutors said they wanted. This factor underlay the decision to incorporate work on study, writing and analytical skills. This was extended to include practice in some of the basic tools of academic survival, including methods of note-taking, of skim-reading, of producing oral and written reports, as well as experience in timed exercises and simulated seminars. Their effectiveness in these various tasks was, given the principle of student-centredness, reflected upon and judged by the students themselves as much as the tutor.

The Materials:

The coursework was based on some of the materials available from LET. Other sources included readings on the experiences of mature students in HE, an analysis of group dynamics and the tutor's own materials, including a jig-saw reading exercise derived from

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[18] In Oliver Fulton, Op. Cit., Ch 8.

[19] Ibid.

[20] See D. Wildermeersch, 'The Principal Meaning of Dialogue for the Construction and Transformation of Reality' in Susan Weil and Ian McGill, (eds), *Making Sense of Experiential Learning* (SHRE/OUP, 1989).

academic texts. The relevant LET handouts are included in the appendices.

Duration:

The course was held over a period of four days. Students were expected to complete several hours of home study in the intervals between contact days. The programme began in mid-May and ended at the beginning of June.

Aims: Day 1

1. To foster a common sense of purpose and a positive group dynamic.

2. To acquaint and familiarise the students with the distinctions between formal and informal learning.

3. To introduce the concept of the transferability of informal learning to formal learning through the medium of general competence statements.

4. To begin matching tutors' requirements to the skills the students already possess.

5. To practise academic skills required; elicit information from a text (skim read), take notes, communicate orally with others.

6. To introduce the need to distinguish between different levels of attainment in preparation for home study and Day 2.

7. Evaluation of Day 1.

Day 2

1. To pursue the understanding of the levels and types of competence required by admissions tutors.

2. To begin linking the students' experiential learning with the language and skills required by the admissions tutors.

3. To facilitate written work by elaborating upon a personal experience (non-threatening) via the medium of different levels of vocabulary.

4. To minimise the threat of arcane academic phraseology.

5. To simulate a study seminar in order to familiarise students with differing discursive methods and purposes, and to reduce potential anxiety induced by unfamiliar activity and group dynamics.

6. Evaluation of Day 2.

Day 3

1. To reduce student anxiety regarding evaluation of their written work by encouraging peer assessment and thereby reducing the authority of the tutor's judgement.

2. To simulate a second seminar group with the tutor as facilitator for comparative purposes. (See Day 2)

3. Evaluation of Day 3.

Day 4

1. To effect a sense of completion/gestalt to the course process.

2. To analyze and practice note-taking as a study skill: what function does it perform?

3. To progress further with written work.

4. To provide simulations of forthcoming interviews for practice and analysis.

5. To evaluate the whole course.

Content:

After the tutor's initial welcome, the first session began with paired introductions to elicit the partner's name, the course applied for and why. This was fed back to the whole group and followed by an alliterative name game.

The tutor then asked the group to brainstorm what was meant by learning. Using two columns, the students tried to distinguish between formal and informal learning. Their results were compared with Handout 1 'How Learning from Experience differs from formal learning'.[21] The next stage was crucial: how to distinguish between an experience and a learnt experience? Kolb's cycle[22] was used as a timed experiential exercise and the students discussed their feelings and the need to progress through stages 3 and 4 of Kolb's scheme, ie the formulation of abstract concepts and the testing of their implications in new situations.

The tutor then facilitated student discussion about the problem of proving the transferability of many of the skills and understanding acquired in unstructured learning and, therefore, the need to translate from 'What I Did' to 'What I learnt' to 'Possible General Competencies'. Handout 2 was studied and discussed within the group. Handout 3 was used as a means of individual self-assessment.

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[21] See Appendices for details of handouts and sources.

[22] See David A. Kolb and R. Fry, 'Toward an Applied Theory of Experiential Learning' in C.L. Cooper, (ed), *Theories of Group Processes* (John Wiley, 1975).

The students used Handouts 2 and 3 to work through one life event and compile a progression from 'What I Did' to 'Possible General Competencies'. The results were discussed in pairs and partners added to each other's lists. One student was asked to share with the group and the remainder were invited to add to the list on the board. The next step involved moving the focus from student competencies to admission tutors' requirements. It was noted that Handout 2 included some general competencies that were suitable for university entry. In subject groups of twos and threes the students compiled a list of assumed requirements on flipcharts, rapporteurs then invited additions from the other groups. The results were compared with Handout 4 (the LET material) which had already been discussed with the admissions tutors. The comparisons were gratifyingly similar.

To effect a change of tempo and to introduce the academic and study skills element, the tutor led the group through a 'jig-saw' reading exercise: each student received a series of questions and a section of text which would provide answers to only some of the questions. In a timed exercise the students had to skim read the relevant material, take appropriate notes and seek out other answers from the rest of the group who had been given different sections to work from. The general feedback was then concerned with how the students had coped with, and felt about, the process.

The day concluded with the acknowledgement that admissions tutors were not only looking for competencies expressed in demonstrable outcomes but for evidence of levels of learning, ie an ability to write or argue in a manner appropriate to a university. In preparation for the second day, the students were asked to continue expressing their experiences, their learning and their competencies; and if possible incorporate an understanding of how vocabulary may reflect different academic levels. At this point they were given Handout 5 which explains how vocabularies can indicate varying levels of learning.

The second day began with a discussion of the process of, and progress in, home study. We then used Handout 5 to discuss the levels of learning, ie i 'knowledge', ii 'interpretation' iii 'application' iv 'analysis' v 'synthesis' vi assessment' as defined in the LET material. The idea is to give students a vocabulary and set of concepts articulating their learning and to make them more aware of process. The common experience of seeing a film was used as a group exercise to create a paragraph representing stages i-vi above. The students then constructed their own paragraphs and discussed these with a partner.

This was followed by a discussion to identify more general skills required for written work derived from their own job/personal experiences. The students were asked to prepare one side of A4 for the third day doing precisely this. A simulated seminar followed to encourage students to practice their study skills. Reading material was handed out and the students were given time to note the main points for the later discussion which would be student-led. One student volunteered to act as facilitator while

the others were asked to monitor their own participation (or lack of it); the tutor acted as observer. The group dynamics were explored and participatory methods discussed. The day concluded with an evaluative feedback session which included student needs for consideration and incorporation into Day 3.

In response to the writing exercise Day 3 began with a discussion of fears and feelings about the process of committing oneself to paper. It was agreed that different types of written work, for example academic essays, work reports or personal memos, required different frameworks. The group was split into twos and threes to share and criticise colleagues' work constructively. The tutor visited each group, checked progress but tried to resist the role of final arbiter. The students were asked to complete final drafts for the next session. Because of the unhappy experience of the previous simulated seminar (see evaluation below), the process was repeated with fresh reading material and with the tutor as facilitator. Once again the group dynamics were explored and the participatory methods discussed. The day concluded with an evaluation and an agreed outline for Day 4.

The final day began with a study skills session. The group debated reasons for, and methods of, note-taking. Each student elected to join one of the following: 'frantic scribblers', 'selective note-takers' or those only allowed five minutes at the end to summarise. The tutor then read an article about group dynamics and illustrated certain points on the board. The students re-grouped and compared notes and levels of understanding. Feedback consisted of a discussion about previously held assumptions on note taking, their efficacy or otherwise. The article's relevance to the course was debated, and the students returned to further peer and tutor assessment of written work.

It had been agreed to hold simulated interviews with the project manager who role-played both an 'unsympathetic' and an 'encouraging' admissions tutor in turn. Individuals volunteered to undergo this process whilst the rest of the group observed and offered feedback. The day concluded with a plenary evaluation of the entire course and the processes involved in which the students were asked to consider the course's aims. Finally, completed assignments, or portfolios, were collected and it was agreed that the remainder would be sent, within the week, to either the relevant admissions tutor or to the project manager.

The Team's Evaluation of the Course:

As we have seen, the course attempted to integrate three basic approaches on the part of the tutor: to alleviate the tension between student-centred learning and academic requirements; to foster a cohesive and supportive group to generate confidence and aid learning; and to incorporate academic and study skills to meet the preferences of admissions tutors as well reduce anxiety about studying in HE. Was it realistic to expect to achieve all this over four days of contact time?

Day 1 was necessarily tightly constructed. 'Ice-breaking' exercises and sharing the reasons for applying to HE engendered a sense of common purpose despite the fact that those applying to the same discipline assumed that they would be in competition for places.

The use of Kolb's cycle (experience, observation, symbolisation and action) as an experiential exercise to establish some of the differences between formal and informal learning proved effective. Working through personal (non-threatening) experiences to understand the learning acquired, and sharing these with a partner, helped the students grasp the potential in reclaiming these experiences, and regarding them as valuable and self-affirming.

It is important to note that APEL, by working through 'life events', may uncover painful personal experience. We have found in facilitating experiential learning that unless a considerable amount of time is available with recourse to a counsellor, if required, it can be inappropriate to highlight painful material as the basis for group activity. This is not to say that students will not want to discuss such issues if they feel safe enough to do so. But a judgement must be made about the appropriateness, or otherwise, of particular topics and guidance given. It is also true that 'safe' experiences often require considerable time for proper consideration. Four days gives, at best, only limited space for each individual and the process, therefore, has to be sensitively handled.

The use of LET material and guided exercises helped to maintain the boundary between a 'course' and a counselling programme. Some colleagues might disagree with this approach and distinction, arguing that responsibility for disclosure lies ultimately with the student; in any case, they suggest, experience cannot be compartmentalised in this way. Nevertheless, the tutor was not a counsellor and sufficient time had also to be given to more academic purposes. However, as we will see, even within these boundaries the group dynamic can be potentially explosive.

The shift in emphasis from personal experience to the general competencies required by admissions tutors, at a time when the students were feeling confident, proved beneficial when the group split into subject areas to decide for themselves what the entrance criteria would be. The clarity of their response and the match with the tutors' stated requirements added an extra confidence derived from the feeling of meeting academia on its own ground.

It seemed appropriate at this point to introduce the study skills element. The 'jig-saw' reading exercise provided an opportunity to tackle academic texts and measure performance in relation to them. The material was chosen for its relative difficulty and could have proved disastrous if the students had been overawed by a lack of understanding. Fortunately, their confidence enabled them not only to complete the task successfully but to begin, tentatively, to question the authority of written material.

Finding the confidence to say 'I don't agree with those conclusions because...' was a rewarding experience for both student and tutor alike.

The first day of the course ended on a high note. In the four days between it and the next session, the process of reflection and consolidation had clearly been of great emotional importance. The experiences which were discussed and shared were not of themselves emotionally charged but a resonance came from the sense of uniqueness and importance of what had been newly discovered and understood. But this brought with it worries about reductionism or at least a concern among the students that this might happen. The consolidation of feelings, and the process of understanding more about the significance of many experiences, whilst bringing greater self-confidence, also prompted a reluctance to translate it all into an academic language and a more public domain and then to have it subject to another's judgement. Translating competencies in this way began to meet resistance on Day 2.

A main area of contention was the length of written work required. The admissions tutors had requested between two and four sides of A4. Some students wanted to complete a *'full portfolio'*; why, they asked, should they be limited to what others thought acceptable? The confidence to engage with academic judgements began to cast doubts on the whole enterprise. There was a growing tension between what was seen as a requirement to play the game (and win a place) and the need to question the 'game' itself. This tension deserves closer inspection.

On the one hand it could be argued that the group had become a victim of its own success. We were fortunate to have 'gelled' so effectively from the outset. The sense of disfunction had been dispelled, at least superficially, with the ability to question academic authority. This, in turn, had given way in some to an understandable anger that 'if this is all there is to it, why has it been denied to me for so long?' Hence the feeling of a game to be played to secure access.

But addressing the question of academic entry requirements and their legitimacy can be done constructively or negatively. The tutor has to take some responsibility for allowing some slippage into negativity. It was born of the struggle between discovering and owning one's learning, and the emotional exhilaration that involved, and the feeling of being judged by an outsider. Notwithstanding what the tutor says, does or feels some tension is clearly inevitable. Feelings of confidence and discovery, so recently experienced, were still fragile and shaky. This, in turn, manifested itself in heightened competitive, even aggressive, individualistic behaviour on the part of one or two participants. They were confused about the nature of academic authority; after all it had interrupted something valuable and new. There was a necessary process to work through.

The exercise to elicit and analyze the 'levels of learning' (see above) and to incorporate these with the levels of vocabulary

proved interesting at this juncture. It is relevant to quote Usher's criticism of this procedure:

> *the six levels (of learning) are in fact Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives and its associated behavioral terminology...once learning has to be stated in terms of 'unambiguous' performance statements, the assumption is that if one cannot do so, then no learning has taken place. But must learning always be performatively statable and demonstrable?...second, why the emphasis on an 'appropriate' terminology of 'action verbs'? This could become a strait-jacket where finding the right word assumes the status of a ritual which must be gone through at the expense of learning.* [23]

The crux of the matter is summed up in Usher's reference to Bainbridge:

> *Getting the balance right requires careful consideration of questions such as who controls the procedures, who makes the decisions about what is required and what constitutes satisfactory evidence of competence.*[24]

As we have seen in section 3, the admissions tutors were uncertain about the competencies their disciplines required. There has been no systematic consideration across subjects of the criteria to assess informal learning. At Kent and other universities, as has already been mentioned, APEL as an idea is far too new for that to have taken place. Although the negotiations with the tutors were the best that could be accomplished in the time, they were also highly unsatisfactory for obvious reasons ie the tutors' unfamiliarity with the principles and practicalities involved.

The effect on the students was to leave them uncertain and confused. They sensed, correctly, that the tutors, and the institution, had only the most limited idea of what was required. The 'Emperor' had few, if any, clothes. Paradoxically, the highly tutor-led 'levels of learning' exercise was greeted with a measure of relief in these circumstances. Perhaps the use of this exercise as a straight pedagogic intervention offered a comforting reassertion of traditional expectations about the role of tutors and students during a period of doubt.

The students worked hard to incorporate more sophisticated

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[23] Robin Usher, Op. Cit., p.72.

[24] Ibid, p.73.

phraseology into their written work. It seemed, at this point, that it was only the tutor who was fretting about whether real learning was taking place.

The quality of the written work itself was also causing the tutor concern. Without having seen examples of work from the various diplomas and part-time degrees, she was struggling with the anxiety that two or three of the students would not be able to produce work of 'a suitable standard'. Once again, where was the yardstick, and who was doing the measuring? The problem was exacerbated by the fact that relevant diplomas were not all at the same academic level, a point discussed in more detail below.

The experience of the next exercise was consistent with the apparent paradox of the need for an authority figure being more acute when the question of 'who can judge?' becomes more explicit. The tutor had chosen to simulate a student-led seminar. This proved to be a mistake. Few students fully participated; some behaved with a truculence reminiscent of secondary school. It was only by analyzing the dynamics afterwards that a degree of group cohesion was restored and some retrospective support provided for the student who had led the discussion.

This central paradox - resentment of, resistance to, but need for, the 'rules of the game' - ebbed and flowed throughout the rest of the course. The open-ended potential and enthusiasm generated on the first day now seemed limited, restricted and targeted at improving written work and dissecting and analyzing the good and bad habits in study and academic practice more generally. If the purpose of the course was only to facilitate entry to HE then it was best effected by tutor-led methods. The tutor's intention throughout had been to maintain confidence by demystifying certain alienating aspects of HE. She had wished to minimise resentment of another's 'right to judge' by placing students' initial response to external comment in a context of peer support and shared criticism. The students resisted this; whilst accepting peer criticism with a kind of detached politeness, they regarded the tutor as the only and final arbiter in matters of what would 'pass' or 'fail'.

The second simulated seminar was more successful in that it was more focused because it was tutor-led. However, it provoked little real engagement because the reading was judged of little interest despite having been selected for its apparent relevance to the group by the tutor.

At times, the pace of the course and the tensions outlined above provoked an understandable irritation towards the tutor, who persisted in trying to maintain a facilitative rather than authoritative posture. The frank discussions and ease of interchange can be cited as evidence of an egalitarian relationship and a more student-centred approach. However, this in turn provoked another anxiety. Would the attempt at a student-centred, student-led course have much relevance once the participants found themselves within a more traditional academic framework?

For this reason it was felt particularly important to effect a 'closure' to Day 4. The APEL course, although a process with ongoing implications, had to be seen by the students as distinct from the reality of the academic institution. The mock interviews, conducted by a relative outsider (the project manager) provided a suitable change in perspective, away from the APEL programme and towards the next step. The emotional gear was shifted towards an evaluative process that was, of itself, part completion.

So far the team's perceptions of students' reactions have been described in general, but brief mention should be made of one or two individuals. There was a superficial distinction between those currently in employment, or working for a voluntary organisation, who were seeking access to HE as a means of consolidating their professional position, and those who seemed to be following a more exploratory route, seeking, perhaps, a sense of greater personal fulfilment. The distinction was expressed initially in terms of seeming greater self-confidence amongst the former, two of whom evinced the greatest competitiveness and were the most vocal in their criticisms of the APEL process.

The distinction and assumptions about motivation did not last. One of the most vocal students disclosed that the choice for HE was not professionally, but personally motivated and had come at a time of change in her life. Her position is similar to that of many women returners as the wider research shows. They are often motivated by 'trauma or transition in their lives' which may masquerade under occupational or other labels. [25]

One of the literature applicants suffered severe doubts about her capabilities. Her acute lack of confidence was scarcely alleviated by the optimism and enthusiasm, as she perceived it, of the rest of the group, who, she confided, all seemed much better than she. The tutor did not doubt the student's abilities but acknowledged the extent of emotional turmoil which was inhibiting confidence and commitment. The student became increasingly anxious about continuing and welcomed the opportunity to have an advisory interview with the relevant course director. This was conducted with tact and sensitivity enabling the student to decide that she needed a year in which to deal with her personal situation, and then, perhaps, reconsider applying for the course.

There has been little or no research to explore differences between those who seek educational opportunities as a means of resolving personal trauma, and those who decide only to consider HE once sufficient emotional ground has been cleared. This particular student decided to seek help elsewhere before trying to enter HE. We felt that she showed great courage, given her situation, in embarking on the APEL course at all.

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[25] See Susan Warner Weil in Oliver Fulton, Op. Cit., p.122.

A final word needs to be said about the completed assignments. As we have seen, there had been a certain dissatisfaction with the length of written work required. Nonetheless, half the students submitted work of the 'statutory' two to four sides of A4. Three others, all of whom were applying to Social Policy, decided on the final day that their previous experiences were sufficient to justify an application for 'advanced standing', ie admission into Part 2 of the degree programme. The students concerned elected to submit their portfolios within the week, having added further arguments to support their case.

A further student, applying for the joint Literature/Philosophy diploma (equivalent to Part 1 of the combined degree), was absent during this discussion. Encouraged by the extent of his prior reading and obvious intellectual ability, the APEL tutor explored the possibility of 'advanced standing' on his behalf. Unfortunately there were institutional difficulties: the stature of the diploma did not necessarily enjoy sufficient cross-disciplinary equivalence to render exemption from Part I an easy matter; it was left that possibilities were to be explored with the student at interview.

Yet another student, applying for the Women's Studies Diploma, had already been offered a place after an advisory interview held during the APEL course. The student was still expected to complete a written assignment and the APEL tutor had to bear in mind that entry to this Diploma was considered equivalent to entry at Part 2.

It should be noted that the different academic levels of diplomas were a source of great confusion to the students. Some were equivalent to Part 1, others, despite the shared nomenclature, to Part 2 and above. The confusion compounds the uncertainty and imprecision over the nature and levels of competence would-be students should attain. It also makes the process of translating informal learning into the skills and attributes UKC requires trebly difficult. There are major problems here which are currently being addressed by the institution as a whole.

5 INTERVIEWING THE ADMISSIONS TUTORS, II.

> *It is wise to separate the two academic functions of helping students prepare evidence of learning and assessing that learning....*
>
> *It is important to note that arrangements have been made in advance through extensive briefing and discussion to ensure that admission tutors are willing and able to receive portfolios.* [26]

The course team again contacted each of the admissions tutors after APEL was completed to arrange the follow up interview. We quickly discovered that the tutors actually conducting interviews were not always the same as the people we had seen first time round. The implications of this, as will be illustrated, were considerable.

There was no problem in the case of the Literature Diploma. The tutor was the same on both occasions and had interviewed four students, including the one deciding to withdraw from the APEL course. This tutor's response to APEL was the most positive; she had found the process both 'useful' and 'successful':

> *APEL did in fact probably colour the rest of my interviews in that I actually knew more clearly what I was looking for.*

It gave the tutor confidence to accept that whereas lip-service might previously have been paid to *'such things as articulacy, logical thought, coherence in expression'*, these were now seen as demonstrable qualities via the APEL process.

This, in turn, probably led to an acceptance of students who might, in the past, have been advised to take an Access course. The tutor was also impressed with the quality of the written work produced by the APEL students which, although very different, illustrated *'their ability to identify learning in the broadest sense'*. Of particular interest had been one student's analysis of the process of her own divorce which demonstrated that some skills central to HE, including an ability to retrieve information, criticise a text and produce a coherent narrative, could be acquired in many ways including the task of preparing one's case for the courts.

The tutor admitted that, prior to APEL, students who had applied to the Literature Diploma would have received a *'very messy interview'*. APEL had provided a much more *'efficient'* means of assessing their capability.

Despite this enthusiasm, she believed that some standardisation

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[26] Norman Evans, Op. Cit., p.7, 12.

of portfolios was necessary in order to facilitate acceptance of the idea in HE nationally. There was simply insufficient time for tutors to deal with a mass of highly idiosyncratic and lengthy documentation. It would have to be translated into a form which could be more easily processed or the system might continue to discriminate against adults with admittedly relevant but unconventional learning. Nor was she necessarily committed to APEL as a group activity:

> *My guess is that they found enormous support on embarking on this self-revealing, frightening road, but most of the road was travelled alone.*

The tutor felt that distance learning portfolio preparation could answer many of the institutional anxieties about the capacity to cope. There could be a national agreement over the form documentation might take. For present purposes, the materials submitted by two APEL candidates were considered well presented and useful and the students were accepted for the course although the candidate for advanced standing had been turned down by a parallel board, philosophy.

The student concerned had been seen by the philosophy tutor and he, too, was impressed by his abilities:

> *Essentially it was a pretty straightforward case and therefore probably not a very good case for judging the effectiveness of APEL.*

The tutor was not aware, however, that the student had applied for advanced standing. Had he been, he *'might have wanted more evidence of whether he could write a structured essay'*. (It appears that the student himself decided not to proceed with an application for advanced standing but this remains unclear.)

However, in this specific case, the only difference APEL appeared to make to the selection process was to confirm, in the tutor's mind, that the student could demonstrate *'intellectual seriousness'*. It is probable that he would have been admitted with or without APEL. Those more able to benefit from APEL, the tutor suggested, were people *'who have got a lot of relative experience, but of a kind that needs to be marshalled and presented, as well as organised in the right sort of way.'* In this particular case the tutor felt the student could already do this more than satisfactorily.

We asked about standardising portfolios. He felt that four sides of A4 were sufficient to judge an applicant's suitability for a diploma whereas one would require *'something pretty solid, that would be equivalent to a course, if one were assessing for advanced standing'*. We also asked how APEL could best be promoted in the wider institution; his response was that modularisation and transfer schemes would make it inevitable that colleagues would have to become interested. Admissions tutors *'are going to have to have some sort of standard'* to judge the more diverse

body of applicants and modes of study that may well emerge in the future.

The student applying to the Women's Studies Diploma had initially talked to the tutor at the Open Day in March. She had, in fact, been offered an interview before the APEL course was completed and had obtained a place. The student had originally applied for a full-time psychology degree and had been rejected, but the Women's Studies tutor felt that the combination of the student's current work, an A-level, and her commitment to the APEL programme, was sufficient proof that she had the capacity to survive and prosper.

She felt in no real position to judge the contribution of the APEL course given the timing of the student's interview. Rather any comments on APEL came from hearing about the APEL idea and from the outline the team had given at their first meeting. In fact, this knowledge had influenced her decision to accept the student.

She assumed that the APEL course would have improved the student's presentational and study skills and that this emphasis differed from other Access courses which concentrated more on subject matter and 'academic bridge-building'. She would, however, have preferred an earlier introduction to the APEL project and its aims.

There was some discussion of possible misunderstandings about what an APEL course should consist of. The tutor had assumed a significant study skills element. The APEL tutor pointed out that APEL's role was limited in this regard; its prime purpose, at least in the Kent model, was to assist the student in expressing skills already acquired in an appropriate language and style. If the skills were largely absent, then the student should be advised to follow an alternative path such as an Access course.

The tutor was also reminded that her main concern in the first interview had been with encouraging students to think about whether they could cope with the course alongside other commitments. She had argued that APEL should challenge students to recognise the demands that academic study makes, not the least given the structure of the Women's Studies Diploma, and to address these in their portfolio. The tutor also had stressed the Diploma's academic standing as being equivalent to Part II of the undergraduate degree. Admissions criteria had, therefore, to be rigorous.

It was emphasised that the structural problems of this particular Diploma (part-time mature students working with full-time undergraduates across a range of modules) underlined the need for students to be relatively secure in their academic attainment and capacity to cope. It therefore reinforced the necessity to spend time in APEL reflecting on the question of motivation.

Finally the tutor was asked in what other ways APEL could help in the process of student selection. She would, she said, like

more information *'all round, if we were able to communicate exactly what was going on'* and *'more detail on the students and where they came from in terms of prior achievements'*. She suggested that students should keep a personal log detailing their progress through APEL which could be submitted as part of the portfolio. This might reveal useful information about the extent of an individual's progress and motivation. She thought that some assessment by APEL tutors of academic standards, as in Access, would also be helpful.

Although the APEL team had not previously interviewed the tutor who conducted the interviews for the Social Policy Diploma, the original choice of interviewee was made on the best advice then available; any new tutor should have been briefed by his/her colleague. There were four candidates for the course, three of whom wanted advanced standing. Unfortunately, the tutor actually conducting the interviews took responsibility for this at the last moment and only discovered the existence of the portfolios immediately prior to the interviews themselves.

She was also short of time when we talked to her about the matter. She remembered receiving information on the APEL project but had ignored it because the concept, as she put it, *'meant nothing to me'*. She had no discussions about APEL with colleagues in her Department despite her responsibilities as Course Director and the fact that one of them had been interviewed and fully briefed by the team.

She admitted irritation at finding the portfolios on her desk and complained about their length. Summer, she pointed out, was the worst time to be involved in extra work of this kind. Her commitments meant that she had to *'parcel out'* the students and their portfolios to other colleagues. She didn't know what had happened to the students nor could she remember which students she had seen, but was aware that *'some of them'* were APEL candidates.

In the circumstances she only had time for *'a quick glance'* at the work and had decided that one or two were clearly suitable. Another was put on the waiting list and subsequently offered a place when someone withdrew. She had no idea, despite the request being submitted according to advice from her Department, that three of them were hoping for advanced standing. She would have looked, she said, at the portfolios more carefully had she known.

However, she did think the applicants concerned lacked the analytical skills and experience to justify exemption from Part 1. One student, she recalled, *'described'* the workings of the university's medical centre; she, the tutor, required a more substantial conceptual analysis of the demographic theme in the student's paper. Another student had described her work in a voluntary organisation promoting the needs of autistic children. She felt the candidate should have demonstrated a greater theoretical understanding of some of the issues involved to gain advance standing; the account was too descriptive and insufficiently analytical.

Notwithstanding, the tutor felt the portfolios had been well prepared and were *'nice looking documents.'* She was asked at this stage to comment on the LET criteria shown to the other tutors in the first interviews; she repeated their belief that an ability to analyze and comment on complex material was of prime importance and that students should try to demonstrate these abilities in a piece of writing. Her main criteria, at present, for selecting students tended to be the conventional measures such as A levels and Access. Work experience could be included if obviously relevant but it was not always easy to assess what people had actually learned.

We asked about the problems of communication in her Department: *'Who should have been approached if not the Director of Studies?' 'Well, that's me, I suppose, but I really wasn't aware of APEL'.* She insisted that she and her colleagues were stretched to the limit and struggling to maintain research output and teaching quality. They had little time, in these circumstances, for alternative selection devices like APEL. It was difficult even to find space to discuss the issue. If we really wished to promote APEL, she insisted, we would only succeed if and when the Faculty was obliged to recruit more adults without formal qualifications. It was a blunt but honest message.

Two other applicants for the Diplomas in Social Policy and Social Psychology were interviewed by a second tutor. He too had not been briefed by anyone about APEL and had also been asked to interview the people concerned at short notice. He had seen four applicants for the Diplomas in all, two of whom were APEL candidates. Since he had no prior knowledge of APEL apart from a hurried conversation with a colleague, he judged APEL's effectiveness mainly in comparison with the non-APEL applicants. He had expected that APEL would provide candidates with *'a means to present themselves in a way that I could understand and therefore I could more easily make judgements about them.'*

He felt that one had achieved this more adequately than the other. The first candidate had thought through *'what I* [the tutor] *might want to know about in terms of prior education experience, handling written work etc.'* She was accepted. The second applicant had presented herself and material badly. Her biggest fault had been trying to impress in the wrong ways; she placed too much emphasis on generalised experience rather than what had been learned. He didn't know whether this was the fault of APEL or the student. She was placed on a waiting list and subsequently offered a place, although he felt she *'would need study skills on how to prepare essays and so on'.*

On further reflection, the tutor felt that, although one of the non-APEL candidates had been offered a place, he would almost certainly have benefited from the APEL process: *'APEL does make a difference. My feeling was that it saves me a lot of effort as it organises what I want to find out more efficiently'.*

He considered that evidence of an ability to write effectively was of particular importance. A frequent problem with mature

students was the *'enormous leap'* from reading material to *'reconstituting it in their own minds and then getting it out again'*. Producing evidence of substantial reading was less important although presenting bibliographies did indicate a particular skill. The tutor confessed to finding the process of decision making in relation to mature students to be *'quite difficult...what I am trying to establish for myself is a mixture of motivation, ability, raw intelligence, and clearly evidence of some transferable skills, so that HE is not too much of a struggle for them.'* That, he felt, was a complex business.

'A test of some sort' would, he thought, be useful and tempting. However, those adults selected to date *'have usually come through all right, and in the end we have been very happy with the result.'*

There was a further issue that he raised: the morality of offering a place to older people who lacked formal qualifications rather than to a younger candidate with A levels. On balance the judgement was made on the basis of *'who is going to do best?'* He felt, while not necessarily deciding one way or the other, that some Access students, in their 40s or 50s, do struggle. Their place might better have been taken by a younger person who could cope more successfully with the course.

In this light, he thought APEL students might constitute a group *'about which it is most difficult to make a judgement. Clearly it is irresponsible to launch any APEL scheme without being assured that the academic colleagues who will be asked to assess the prior learning are fully briefed on the nature of the undertaking and support it.'*[27] There was much to be concerned about, including the possibility of higher attrition rates and the pain of individual failure if the matter was not properly organised.

We would, of course, concur. And, in the context of the pilot, clearly not everything functioned as it ought to have done. We assumed that the tutors we originally interviewed would be those seeing the APEL students; if there was a change of plan, the new tutor would be briefed by the Course Director or a colleague. That is what we asked for but obviously it did not happen in every case.

Fortunately, as described, three of the tutors provided an element of consistency and their comments were especially helpful to the research. Unfortunately, half of the eight candidates, including two who were claiming advanced standing, were interviewed by tutors who were uninformed about the aims of APEL. It needs to be stated that the students, and their work, deserved better treatment from the system.

Wherever fault may lie, this is clearly an unacceptable way to proceed. As Norman Evans puts it in the context of the earlier

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[27] See Norman Evans, Op. Cit., p.23 who makes a similar point.

APEL projects in the polytechnics:

> *Tutors responsible for initiating schemes for the identification of prior learning have to do considerable preparatory work with colleagues in a variety of academic disciplines to make sure that, as required, assessments will be conducted and that can take a great deal of time.*[28]

For the APEL process to work satisfactorily requires clear procedures to be established throughout the institution. But that is unlikely, as the Social Policy Course Director and others remarked, in the context of abundant conventional applicants with easily digested qualifications. If APEL is to progress, therefore, other factors may need to come into play perhaps including an external push towards widening access from, among others, the new funding council. APEL and adult learners might be more appealing if resources are at stake.

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[28] Ibid p.23.

6 OUTCOMES AND STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF APEL AND THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS.

> *The APEL Course helped to introduce me to Academia, principally by showing me what was expected by the admissions tutors and how to present myself. In this regard, the discussion about assessing levels of learning and the vocabulary used with which to express them was most useful....*
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> *At my initial interview for a place on the APEL course I was unprepared, unsure of what to say, nervous and mute; whereas at my interview last week I was prepared...and I considered that it went well.* (APEL applicant for the English Literature and Philosophy Diploma).

What subsequently happened to the students and what, in retrospect, did they think about APEL and the admissions process more generally? A questionnaire was devised to cover all these aspects and every participant duly completed and returned it. It was unfortunate that we were unable, for reasons of time and logistics, to probe some of their comments in depth through individual and group interviews.

Of the nine students involved, four, as indicated, had applied for the Diploma in Social Policy and Social Psychology; three for English Literature, the others for English Literature and Philosophy and Women's Studies. All the Social Policy applicants were offered places, although none was given advanced standing. Two of the four have actually begun the Diploma; of the others one was forced to withdraw due to leaving the area while the other's *'husband's business went into liquidation and I am not now in a position to start a course'*.

The applicants for English Literature had mixed fortunes. Two were offered a place, one of whom, the person quoted at the beginning of this section, was also accepted to study philosophy. As for the others, the position was more complicated. One applicant described her situation thus:

> *I was not successful in gaining a place on the Diploma Course. However, I was not rejected out of hand. It was discussed with me that my inexperience at essay writing may give me a disadvantage to my fellow students. I agreed, and I was accepted onto the Access programme with the intention of applying for a part-time degree place in the humanities next year.*

A further candidate, referred to in the previous section, faced a number of personal and educational difficulties. She described her situation as follows: *'APEL was a fact finding exercise. I*

was, and still am to a certain extent, unsure of where I am going. Due to ill-health and domestic commitments I was unable to apply for the course of my choice...APEL had pointed out the many opportunities available to mature students via Access courses'. She has now begun a one year Access course at South Kent Further Education College. She felt she needed more time and space to tackle personal and emotional problems as well as prepare for study in HE.

Given the inadequacies of the interview and admissions process illustrated in the previous section, it is useful to begin an analysis of students' responses by reference to those applying to take the Social Policy and Social Psychology Diplomas.

One of the applicants found her interview much easier than the simulation but, unsurprisingly, reported that while the interviewer *'knew a little about APEL, she didn't seem au fait with the course content or objectives. Due to a misunderstanding within her Department...she wasn't given my essay until just before the interview - she therefore spent five minutes skimming it whilst I was in the interview room.'* A further person recounted a similar story. The tutor was aware of the course but not particularly knowledgeable about it. Her opinion that *'it would have been better if the tutor had seen the portfolio before the interview'* was, in the circumstances, a masterpiece of understatement.

A similar story emerged from the other two candidates but they considered that, in the circumstances, the tutor concerned had handled the interview well: he was *'pretty good - talked about APEL (as he had some knowledge of its function) was interested to learn that I'd been to Christchurch College for a year.'* The other student was angry that the portfolio bore no relevance to obtaining a place on the course. Nonetheless, the interview was satisfactory and provided an opportunity for *'an in-depth discussion'* about a range of factors and experience.

The other students considered that interviewers, on the whole, paid proper regard to what had been produced and were experienced in dealing with adult applicants. One, the Literature tutor, gave considered feedback on student submissions in relation to both style and content. Everyone felt that the simulated interviews, held as part of the APEL course, had prepared them for the ordeal of the actual event.

Most people expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the admissions process overall. One thought it *'a mystery which I still don't appreciate. Disjointed and unco-ordinated.'* In this case the student had applied for the Social Policy Diploma. It is worth adding that almost everyone found the admissions process, what the University provided by way of courses and options and what it expected from applicants by way of qualifications to be deeply confusing. If this was true in the case of the APEL students, it may be even more so for mature student applicants in general. Those responsible for admissions in large, complex bureaucracies like universities, need to be

constantly reminded of this fact.

The verdict on APEL itself was, predictably, mixed although most were anxious to praise the tutorial team. On the credit side, there were a number of comments. APEL was considered valuable, in one case, because it brought together work and academic achievements in an integrated way for the first time. It helped prepare for the interview and to handle it better than would otherwise have been the case. It assisted a number of people to appreciate the time and commitment involved in HE study and the *'sorts of level we would be working at.'* APEL also produced greater confidence in participants' ability to cope with academic life. The benefit of being helped with essay writing techniques was mentioned by one person as well as practice in seminar and discussion techniques. The small group, and the opportunity to learn from other students, was important to some. One person thought that she would have found a larger group *'intimidating'*.

There were also many useful criticisms. Two were felt to be of major importance by four of the students. The first was to do with the purpose and nature of portfolio preparation:

> *At the beginning I thought that we were to write a portfolio and be guided through the best ways to present ourselves within it and at interview. Towards the end of the course I felt it became much more general and was unsure of the aims.*

The four people concerned found the switch to a more limited and discrete piece of writing, following receipt of the detailed comments and expectations of the admissions tutors, confusing. This is probably the main factor behind the criticism from these and other students that the purpose of APEL, at times, seemed uncertain.

One participant thought that the students should have been given examples of the different potential components of a portfolio including, for example, *'an extended essay, an essay with curriculum vitae information attached, a work report, a critical essay and a piece of creative writing'*.

The second major criticism concerned the tutor's role in the course. Some wanted, as the tutor thought, more direction. One person felt it would have been better to have been presented with an agenda, although she was anxious to point out that the tutor's presentations were always good. Another wanted a different approach in the group, particularly in getting students applying for the same diploma to work together rather than with people applying to take *'totally different courses'*.

A different person found the learning theories material somewhat daunting and wondered what a 'lay person' would make of it. This particular individual admitted to feeling threatened by APEL from time to time. Some of the exercises, correspondingly, lost their relevance because of the *'stress level of the participants'*. This was an uncharacteristic comment in the context of the returns as

a whole. It may be that this participant was one of those most confused by the change in direction and the uncertainties surrounding what the system actually wanted.

There is nothing surprising in these responses given the earlier analysis. The main student concerns emanate from uncertainties about what students were supposed to produce and, therefore, the purpose of the course. Because their initial interview for APEL had taken place before the APEL team talked to admissions tutors they were told that the main aim of the course was to prepare a comprehensive portfolio. The emphasis began to change as the comments from tutors were received. In retrospect, it is obvious that interviews with tutors should have been arranged well before the course began.

The concern on the part of some for more direction was also a predictable response in the light of the tutor's analysis although this was only explicitly stated by a minority. The course, in the opinion of one person, *'lost its way somewhere in the middle'*. Such comments are consistent with the APEL tutor's observations on the emotional life of the group ie it became more turbulent, and participant behaviour more paradoxical, as students reassessed their prior learning in more positive ways. They resented the possibility that the wholeness of their experience might be distorted in a short piece of writing or that academics would sit in judgement on what they had only recently discovered, and valued, in themselves.

However, it is important to add that despite these difficulties everyone who completed APEL felt they gained significantly from it. They were better prepared for interview and more conscious of what studying in a university involved. People valued the growing awareness of skills they already possessed but which had either been unrecognised or devalued.

The students appreciated the tutor and her style, even if there was disagreement over some of the methods used in the course. In retrospect, it is increasingly unsatisfactory that there were no additional in-depth interviews with the students to examine some of these emotional and pedagogic questions at greater length.

Whatever the criticisms of the process, the fact that everyone returned the questionnaire and provided detailed comment suggests that APEL was an important experience. It made participants think, at times uncomfortably, about what they were doing and why as well as what it means to learn. It was unfortunate that the nature and purpose of a major element in the course, the portfolio, became confused and that, in some cases, students' submissions were cursorily treated. Notwithstanding, the process of producing a major piece of writing, and the 20 hours of working with a supportive tutor in a small group, helped most to feel more confident at the interview about themselves and what they could offer the University. Others felt better able to define an alternative, and for the time being, more appropriate next step.

7 CONCLUDING REMARKS.

The research has focused on four dimensions of the APEL process. First, the problem of identifying the competencies students need to survive in HE. Second, how students can best articulate a variety of forms of learning in a language commensurate with the disparate and uncertain definitions of what is required. Third, how to differentiate learning which is relevant to HE without dismissing other experience as unworthy. Fourth, the difficulty of producing portfolios which, while doing justice to what an individual has learned in disparate contexts, are in a form to be easily assimilated and processed by admissions tutors.

Clearly, there are major problems in students trying to produce competency statements relevant to particular disciplines when admissions tutors are unsure about what they want or whether the exercise is even appropriate. The tutors in this project tended to opt for the known and familiar, wanting conventional pieces of writing rather than lengthy portfolios. However, those portfolios which did include detail on the level and types of learning acquired in diverse circumstances were found to be helpful by particular tutors and indeed transformed their understanding of the relevance of such material.

For APEL to work truly effectively for everyone concerned, most of all the students, must involve admissions tutors, and other academics, in identifying more precisely what is required for learners to succeed in particular fields. The fact that tutors have not considered this to be sufficiently important probably reflects the low institutional priority attached to greater access for adults as much as any intrinsic difficulty in being explicit about prerequisites. When there are plenty of traditional applicants around with conventional qualifications there is no real incentive to think more deeply about what successful learning actually requires.

This study also suggests that there is a real danger of treating parts of an individual's experience as unworthy, or of ignoring aspects of learning considered irrelevant to HE. The tension around this from the viewpoint of the student stems from the nature of the process: when students discover new or previously undervalued skills they want to own that realisation for a period rather than be subject to assessment. There is an acute tension, as Usher has observed, between the essentially *'private activity of reflecting on experience and the public activity of having the learning from that activity publicly assessed.'*[29] It is important to remember the types of students in the Kent study; many were in transition personally and professionally and feeling vulnerable as their past, present and future were reconsidered. It is not surprising that strong emotions were consequently released.

The APEL students, as with adults in general, were also concerned

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[29] Robin Usher, Op. Cit. p.70.

to integrate and synthesise disparate experience rather than to differentiate or compartmentalise it. The parts had to be judged in the context of the whole, particularly when some pieces had only recently been acknowledged and valued. This helps to explain why some of the APEL students were angry at having to discriminate only those elements of learning appropriate to HE rather than treating these as elements in a wider story.

It is difficult, however, to see how some tension can be avoided given that APEL is, in this context, part of a selection procedure although sensitive tutoring and facilitation will no doubt help. In the competition for a scarce commodity it is inevitable that applicants must demonstrate what the gatekeepers most prize, even if the latter are muddled about what they want. And what is most prized by way of prior achievement will inevitably be selective. The only way to avoid the problem is to stay away from HE altogether.

Even a more experientially based HE curriculum, which Susan Weil and others rightly advocate, or a clearer sense throughout the system of the skills required, do not obviate the need to rank certain skills and abilities above others. Some discrimination between different sorts of experience is necessary and inevitable. Not everything that has been learned will be relevant to the ability to write a clear narrative, to synthesise from many sources, to apply and evaluate different theories or to demonstrate other competencies. Some experiences are, for the purposes of HE, inevitably more equal than others.

On the other hand students naturally want to say something about the wider context of their learning, and themselves as learners, as a consequence of the APEL dynamic. And it is often useful, if unpredictably so, for the gatekeepers to know more about the context of learning as well as the skills acquired: situations may, on close scrutiny, be analogous to the demands of the classroom or what is required for successful academic study. There is a danger of relevant material being lost in over-standardised submissions or excessively resticted definitions of relevance. While everyone can benefit from being more succinct, too restricted or standardised a procedure risks excluding important and potentially useful insights. Ironically, much would have been lost, to tutor and student alike, if the woman using her own divorce to demonstrate appropriate competencies had felt unable to develop her case at length.

Yet there is a real dilemma given the increasing number of applicants for HE. Admissions tutors understandably balk at the prospect of masses of material presented in disparate ways. When time is scarce there is a danger that tutors will rely on the tried and trusted to the disadvantage of the informal learner. This problem needs to be addressed: it would of course help the situation if UKC and other institutions gave more priority and committed greater resources to student selection.

It should be said that the use of distance learning methods, as one proposed solution to the problem of handling large numbers

of would-be students, may be inappropriate for particular kinds of people, arguably the majority of adult returners. Working in a small group was important to the Kent students and such methods may be especially relevant to learners from under-privileged backgrounds who are uncertain about themselves or their suitability for HE. As we try to encourage more people to seek entry, arguably the greater the need for such methods. It is a matter of priorities. It should be noted that some of those institutions setting greatest store on the widest access commit most resources to small group work and individual tutorials as essential elements within APEL.[30]

Resistance to standardisation with regard to portfolios does not, of course, lessen the necessity for institutions such as Kent to seek some common policy towards APEL throughout the institution alongside searching for more explicit criteria about what students need to succeed. The organisational mishaps and inter-disciplinary confusions described in this report, as well as the ambiguities and inconsistencies surrounding the different levels of diplomas, have to be addressed by the institution as a whole.

Academics and older universities are, however, unlikely to give APEL and the admissions process priority if the number of conventional applicants remains buoyant and given the real pressure on time and resources from research selectivity, academic audit, the assessment of teaching quality etc. Unless, that is, there is the carrot of additional resources for access initiatives or the stick of fewer resources for those refusing to diversity their student base. There may also be resistance in universities to any notion that admissions should become the function of a central unit with particular expertise in interviewing and, for example, the assessment of prior learning. Nonetheless, such a unit could develop the necessary expertise to facilitate APEL as well as offer continuing support to adult students across all programmes.

The main impetus for change of this kind may have to come from the outside. If the new funding council decides to set quotas for mature students and allocates resources according to positive discrimination criteria, as the PCFC has done, minds and hearts may be open to change. The moves towards modularity in HE may also be a stimulus to the development of APEL as well as access more generally. APEL, for either admissions or credit exemption, is more easily operated in a modular CAT structure, particularly if academics have been more explicit about course objectives and most of all outcomes. If this is done, the task of identifying the competencies students need in the first place becomes easier.

UKC has taken small steps along this road by agreeing a common basic unit of study for all its undergraduate programmes which should facilitate the development of multi-disciplinary study and credit accumulation. However, for Kent, the development of APEL and an access strategy probably requires external pressure. There

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[30] See Norman Evans, Op. Cit.

is as yet no impetus to change radically the balance of the undergraduate population. However, this could change if there was a commitment from within especially on the part of management. There is evidence that even the most popular universities are open to change in this way. At Nottingham, for example, the University itself decided on a policy to recruit more adult learners and took specific action to bring this about. It imposed minimum quotas for mature students on all departments; it set in motion the establishment of a modular structure and credit accumulation; it revised academic timetables to take into account, as far as possible, the child care needs or work commitments of older learners; it provided more adequate creche provision and it established APEL as a key element in its admissions policy.

All this at a university with the largest number of conventional A level applicants, higher even than Kent. Nottingham has embarked on change without pressure from funding councils, despite its popularity. The impetus for change emanated, it seems, from senior management, as APEL reports from the University and research into the developments of CATS in British Universities reveal.[31] We hope that the same can happen at Kent and that our research will be one element in pushing the University, and maybe even the system more widely, in a similar, more accessible, direction.

[31] Copies of various reports on the development of CATS are available from the Unit for the Study of Continuing Education at Kent.

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APPENDIX 1, THE QUESTIONNAIRE TO APEL AND ACCESS STUDENTS.

Unit for the Study of Continuing Education
School of Continuing Education
Rutherford College
The University
Canterbury
Kent CT2 7NX

Tel.0227 764000 ext.3538

Lecturer in the Theory and Practice of Continuing Education
Linden West BA MPhil

Honorary Research Assistant
Mary Telford BA MSc

Dear Student,

Are you on the verge of taking an Access or APEL course? Could you spare the time to fill in the enclosed questionnaire for us? Access and APEL courses are, as you know, relatively new. You follow closely on the heels of the pioneers! This makes you and your experiences very interesting to adult educationalists. Our interest is not just academic (although it is that too) but is aimed at improving the service offered to you. In order to meet your learning needs, and those of the students who come after you, we are carrying out a survey. We hope that you will feel able to help us by filling in this questionnaire.

All the information you give us will be STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. At the end of the questionnaire we ask you to write you name but this is so we can check you off when you have replied and not bother you with reminders. When you seal the enclosed envelope it will come straight to the research unit. What you write will not be seen by the institution to which you are applying, although we may discuss the overall findings of the survey with them. Nor are we able to influence the outcome of your application in any way.

This is the first step in a wider study. After the survey we hope to meet some of you individually to chat about your experiences. At the end of the questionnaire you will be able to give us permission to contact you again, and we hope that you will do so.

Very many thanks for your time and help,

Yours sincerely,

(Mary Telford)

Access Student Questionnaire

Below, we are asking, firstly, for you to give us a picture of your interests, secondly for your thoughts as you enter access, thirdly for some details about your present circumstances and finally there is a request for your help with a research project.

In setting out the questions below we are aware that achievements and circumstances vary a great deal, and it may be that the space provided and the examples given are not appropriate to you. Please put in any additional information or comments which are important to you, and continue on the space (or add a sheet of your own) if you wish to do so. The more you can give, the more this helps us, even if this means you choosing to rewrite a question! But do not worry if you have to omit some areas because you cannot remember details.

SECTION 1

1. What were your interests and/or favourite activities during your school years?

a) in school . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

b) outside school . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

2) During all your school years were there any badges, certificates, that you worked for or won? (e.g. School prizes, poster painting prizes, cycling proficiency, scout badges, First Aid Certificate, swimming certificates, music grades, individual or team sports contests etc.)

a) in school . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

b) outside school . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

3. At what age did you complete your full-time education? Please tick one of the following:

14 and under.....[ ]
15.....[ ]
16.....[ ]
17.....[ ]
18 and over.....[ ]

4. What academic/professional qualifications did you have, if any, by the age of 22. Please tick one or more of the following or add alternatives.

No qualifications gained at school.....[ ]
CSE/O level/GCSE or equivalent.....[ ]
A level/ONC/OND/BTECH or equivalent.....[ ]
City and Guilds.....[ ]
Nursing qualifications/social welfare etc...[ ]
HNC/HND/Teachers cert. or equivalent.....[ ]
Degree course/s (e.g. Open University).....[ ]

Other, please specify . . . . . .

. . . . . .

5. Please would you tell us a little more, below, about each of the achievements ticked above? It would be helpful to know the range and level of success (e.g. for O-level list the subjects and grades attained)

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

6 a) List any courses you have taken since leaving continuous education (with dates if possible). Perhaps you have followed a career which involves periods of full-time study alternating with work experience (e.g. nursing, Merchant Navy etc.)? Perhaps you have changed your occupation and sought retraining?

i) . . . . . .

ii) . . . . . .

iii) . . . . . .

iv) . . . . . .

v) . . . . . .

6 b) If any of the above courses led to formal qualifications, please specify by copying the number above and adding the qualification.

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

SECTION II

The following questions will help us to build up a picture of the needs which can be met by access courses.

8 a) Which course/s are you applying for?

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

8 b) At which institution do you plan to study? (e.g.South Kent College of Technology, Ashford Branch)

. . . . . .

9 When you decided to apply for this course, what did you hope to get out of it? What are your aims? Please read through the aims listed below and indicate for each one, how important it is in your decision. Try to do this fairly quickly, your first reactions are best.

If it is very important put "1"
If fairly important put "2"
If not important put "3"
and if it does not apply in your case, then put "4"

Please rate from "1" to "4" for each aim:

To enable me to carry out my job more effectively.... [ ]
To keep ahead of my children.....[ ]
To gain promotion/increased salary.....[ ]
This is a good time for me to try something new.....[ ]
To improve my career prospects generally..... [ ]
To learn more about a subject which really interests me.....[ ]
To make up for lack of educational opportunities in the past.....[ ]
To develop a shared interest with my spouse/partner, friend etc.....[ ]
Want a change.....[ ]
To make new friends with similar interests.....[ ]
To enable me to re-enter the job market.....[ ]
Something in me wants to grow.....[ ]
To gain educational background/qualifications for a higher level course.....[ ]
Want an interest to keep my mind active.....[ ]
To help me in my "voluntary" role (e.g. in Trade Union community of political work).....[ ]
To enable me to enter a particular career which I have in mind.....[ ]
To see if I could succeed at a course of this sort....[ ]
To acquire more self-confidence by gaining a qualification.....[ ]
To get away for a time from my usual surroundings and responsibilities at home.....[ ]

Other aim, please specify below . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

To enable me to enter a particular career which I have in mind.....[ ]
To see if I could succeed at a course of this sort....[ ]
To acquire more self-confidence by gaining a qualification.....[ ]
To get away for a time from my usual surroundings and responsibilities at home.....[ ]

Other aim, please specify below . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

10. Using the above can you expand a little by describing ways in which you think the course will be particularly helpful for you? Perhaps:

in terms of personal development . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

educationally . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

professionally . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

other ways . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

11 In what ways would you hope adult learning experiences will compare with being at school?

a) Things which I would like to be different . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

b) Things I would like to be the same . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

12 Ideally what would you like to see yourself doing five years from now? . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

SECTION III

Below we are asking for details about yourself. Please tick the appropriate boxes.

13. Are you

Male.....[ ]
Female.....[ ]

14. Which age-band describes you?

25 or under....[ ]
26-35.....[ ]
36-45.....[ ]
46-55.....[ ]
56-60.....[ ]
61-65.....[ ]
66 or over.....[ ]

15. Are you:

single.....[ ]
married.....[ ]
divorced and
remarried....[ ]
not remarried[ ]
other.....[ ]
widowed and
remarried....[ ]
not remarried[ ]

other.....[ ]

16. Have you any children?

Yes.....[ ]
No.....[ ]

If "yes" please describe them (by age and sex)

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

17. Are you disabled in any way? Please specify . . . . . .

. . . . . .

18. a) Which of the following best describes your employment status? (tick one only)

in full-time paid employment.....[ ]
in part-time paid employment.....[ ]
temporarily unemployed but seeking work...[ ]
full-time housewife/person.....[ ]
self-employed.....[ ]
retired.....[ ]
permanently unemployed.....[ ]

18 b) If you are not currently in paid employment when you earning last? . .

. . . . . .

18 c) What is/was the title of your main job? . . . . . .

. . . . . .

19 a) Are you the main breadwinner?.....Yes [ ] No [ ]

19 b) If "No", what is the title of the breadwinner's job? . . . . . .

. . . . . .

SECTION IV Please enter your name and the title (Mr, Mrs, Ms. etc.) by which you prefer to be addressed.

Name..... Title . . . . . .

Please fill in the details below if you are willing for your name to go to Mary Telford at the School of Continuing Education in order to take part in the research project.

Address . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . .

Telephone number where I am willing to be contacted in the

daytime.....evening.....

signed.....date.....

Thank you very much for taking the time and trouble to fill this in. If you have any further information or comment to add it can be written below (or in the margins, on anther sheet, or wherever seems best!) We are very grateful for your cooperation and hope that you have not found the above too arduous, and that you will be willing to offer us a little more of your time by agreeing to sign the section above. This will give us permission to get in touch with you again. Signing it does not commit you in any way.

This questionnaire should be sealed in the enclosed addressed envelope and posted to us at the School of Continuing Education. Once again, I would like to reassure you that information contained here is held in the strictest confidence.

Good luck with your plans for the future and many thanks,

Mary Telford

APPENDIX 2, HANDOUT 1

How Learning from Experience Differs from "Formal" Learning

1 In the first place, it has not been as organised as in the way in which a class might be taken through a subject or a syllabus by a teacher or lecturer. It is largely **unstructured.**

2 This is because the learning process has begun with the **experience** of a real-life, **specific** situation. **The idea comes from the experience.**

By contrast formal learning tends to start with a broad foundation in general principles or basic concepts and moves ultimately to specialist applications of them. So a course in business studies begins with a study of the principles of, for example, accounts, economics, law, quantitative methods, and only in later years applies these principles in fields such as industrial relations, management, accounting, marketing and business decision-making.

3 Because the learning is derived from experience is it **more personal**, more individualised - and therefore less likely to fall easily into the academically devised frameworks which we call "courses".

4 Often it is learning which is **unconsciously acquired.** It may therefore be difficult - even for the learner - to identify and describe it.

5 In consequence the assessment and evaluation of experiential learning is different from assessing and evaluating formally acquired learning. The methods used to assess formal learning - examinations, essays, for example - may not be appropriate to assess experiential learning.

6 Experiential learning is therefore just as real as learning which is acquired in a formal academic setting. What is more it is **usually more permanent**: it is not readily forgotten or lost.

7 After all, learning through experience is in itself a **form of self-development** because the learner has responsibility for his/her own learning. It therefore becomes part of you.

This is not to say that self-development does not take place in the formal learning situation, but in the classroom the emphasis is on learning through instruction rather than through experience.

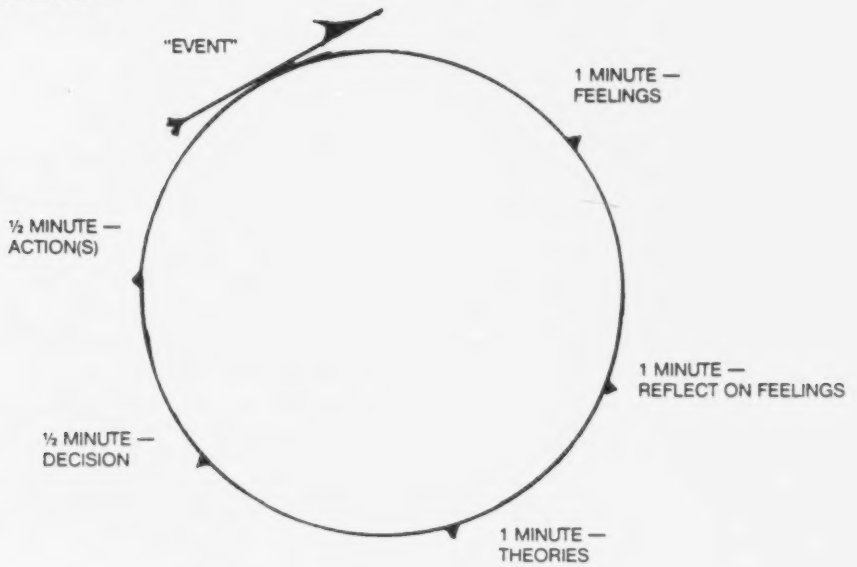
What you actually learn in the classroom situation may not be what is being taught. You may learn more about methods of keeping yourself awake than the subject-matter of a lecture!

Source: John Buckle, *A Learner's Introduction to Building on your Experience*, (LET, 1988) p.8.

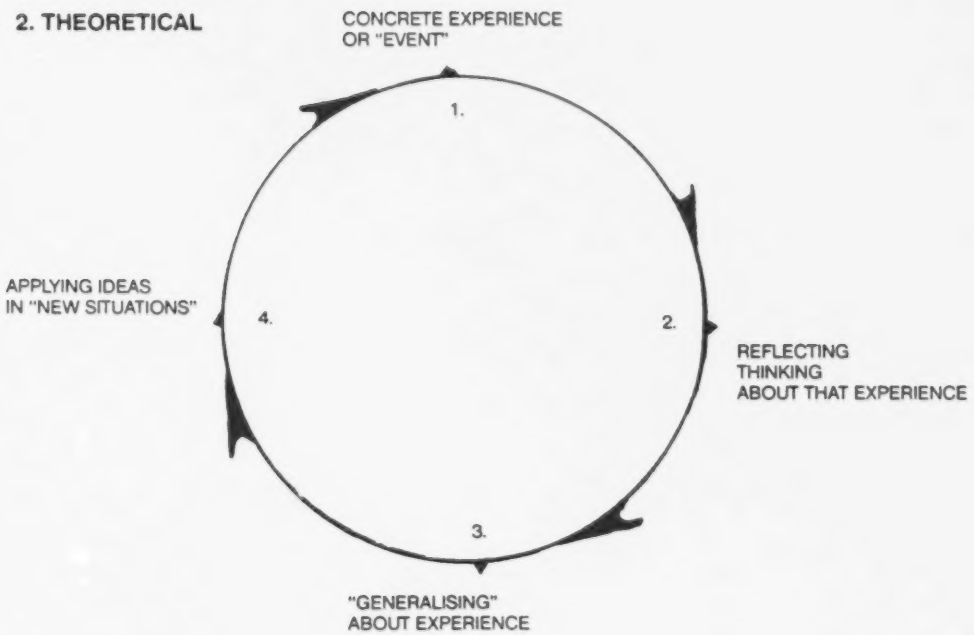
APPENDIX 3

KOLB'S CYCLE

1. EXPERIENTIAL



2. THEORETICAL



SOURCE: JOHN BUCKLE: OP. CIT. P.2

APPENDIX 4, WRITING COMPETENCY STATEMENTS.

Example 1 Writing Competence Statements

Activity	What I did	Knowledge Used	Skills used	Competence Statements	Possible General Competence Statements
Publicity work for local charity	Wrote press releases	Knowledge of charity org'tion and its work Knowledge of local press, editors, contacts etc.(T) How to write a press release. (T)	Literacy(T) Typing(T) Keyboard skills(T)	I can write and type a short press release giving details of a future event, to meet a deadline	Identify and use information relevant to an intended purpose. Plan work to meet deadlines. Write in the form relevant to a particular context.
	Liaise with media	Knowledge of local press,editors, contacts, who's who, etc.	Telephone skills (T) Interpersonal skills, including interviewing self-presentation selling(T)	I can arrange and conduct an interview with a journalist on a topic concerned with this charity, for newspaper,radio or TV. I can maintain long-term contact (at least one year) with media personnel.	Communicate orally in an appropriate and effective way in 1:1 and small group contexts.
	Spoke to groups of interested people (e.g.Round Table)	Knowledge of work of charity.	Public speaking.	I can present a talk to twenty people for fifteen minutes and deal with difficult questions.	

(T) These areas might be transferable to a different context.

Source: *Handbook for the Assessment of Experiential Learning*, (LET, 1987) p.11.

APPENDIX 5, GENERAL LEARNING CHECKLIST.

1. **WHAT DO YOU KNOW?**

   eg. about your job;
   about your organisation;
   specialist/technical knowledge;
   your special interests;
   about the skills listed in 2 - 10 below.

2. **CAN YOU WORK ON YOUR OWN?**

   eg. organise your time;
   organise your tasks;
   see a task through to completion;
   work to deadlines;
   set and achieve objectives for yourself.

3. **CAN YOU WORK WITH OTHER PEOPLE?**

   eg. deal effectively with others on a one-to-one basis;
   recognise the needs of others and take account of them in your relationships with them;
   influence/persuade/motivate others;
   work effectively in a group;
   contribute to group planning and group decisions;
   lead a group.

4. **CAN YOU COMMUNICATE?**

   eg. orally;
   in writing;
   graphically;
   in more than one language;
   one to one/in a group situation;
   in different contexts: such as work, social, academic.

5. **CAN YOU SOLVE PROBLEMS?**

   eg. recognise a problem;
   analyze a problem into its constituent parts;
   formulate and evaluate possible solutions;
   plan to deal with it;
   actually deal with it;
   evaluate the outcome;
   plan to avoid similar problems.

6. **CAN YOU COLLECT AND USE INFORMATION?**

   eg. find relevant information;
   extract relevant information from a variety of sources such as books, reports, media, graphs, statistics, accounts and by observation;
   discriminate between reliable/unreliable sources;
   reorganise information for a particular purpose.

7. **HAVE YOU MATHEMATICAL AND NUMERACY SKILLS? CAN YOU**

   eg. calculate in different ways;
   use fractions, decimals, percentages, ratios, formulae;
   solve mathematical problems in different contexts.
   keep accounts.

8. **HAVE YOU SPECIAL SKILLS NOT LISTED ABOVE?**

eg. typing;
computer programming;
drawing;
designing;
surveying.

9. **CAN YOU EVALUATE YOUR OWN PERFORMANCE?**

eg. in carrying out a particular task;
in a variety of roles - as a parent; employee, club member, etc;
identify your strengths and weaknesses;
plan effectively for your future development.

10. **CAN YOU EVALUATE THE PERFORMANCE OF OTHERS?**

eg. assess the skills and abilities of others;
set up and apply measures of performance - tests, production targets;
interview for selection.

Source: John Buckle; Op.Cit., pp.24-5.

APPENDIX 6, LEVELS OF LEARNING.

LEVELS OF LEARNING	WHAT YOU KNOW	WHAT YOU DO
1. KNOWLEDGE OF FACTS		
It relates to knowledge of such things as: specific facts e.g. dates events places etc. -definitions -classifications -criterea -methods of organising data -principles -theories.	"I KNOW... ..the countries of the EEC ..the principles of management ..the definition of a contract ..how to solve problems." What can you do with this knowledge?	At the most basic level, you are able to tell others WHAT you know, so you are able to say:- "I CAN... ..list ..name ..specify ..enumerate etc. the countries in the EEC ..recount ..repeat etc. the principles of management ..define.. contract ..state the techniques of problem solving.
2. INTERPRETATION OF FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE		
A rather high level of learning because now you can interpret the facts you know both for your own benefit and that of others. It addresses the question. "DO I UNDERSTAND?"	"I UNDERSTAND.. ..the EEC ..principles of management ..the definition of the contract ..how to solve problems" *And so I am able to say.*	"I CAN.. ..describe the countries of the EEC ..restate/explain the principles of management ..explain the definition of a contract ..explain the techniques of problem solving."
3. APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE		
At a higher level, you may be able to analyse the knowledge you have- i.e. break it into its constituent elements - in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.	"I UNDERSTAND.. ..the EEC ..the principles of management ..the definition of a contract ..how to solve problems." *to such an extent* that..	"I CAN.. ..draw a map of the countries in the EEC ..locate the EEC countries on a map of the world ..apply the principles of management to my department ..draw up a contract ..give examples of a contract ..solve different types of problems".

4. ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE

At a higher level, you may be able to analyse the knowledge you have- i.e. break it into its constituent elements - in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.	"I KNOW HOW TO ANALYSE WHAT I KNOW" *in that..*	"I CAN.. ..compare ..contrast..the countries of the EEC ..distinguish ..appraise ..debate..the principles of management ..analyse ..examine ..criticise.. the definition of a contract ..compare different techniques of solving particular types of problems."

5. SYNTHESIS OF KNOWLEDGE

A still higher level of knowledge may be reflected in the ability to bring together different elements of what you know and present them in a new way, or create a different framework for them, or produce a new idea.	"I CAN PRODUCE IDEAS". *in that..*	"I CAN.. ..formulate policies ..propose policies for the future development of the EEC ..teach ..redesign..the principles of management ..develop new ideas..about management ..redefine..a contract.. suggest modifications to a contract ..develop new ways of solving problems."

6. EVALUATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Here you are in a position to evaluate or judge known material by applying criteria of various kinds to it.

To the question:

"CAN I ASSESS THE VALUE OF WHAT I KNOW?"

"CAN I MAKE JUDGEMENTS ABOUT WHAT I KNOW?"

"I CAN ASSESS WHAT I KNOW IN VARIOUS WAYS"

for example

"I CAN..
..assess EEC in the light of political, social and economic theories
..evaluate
..appraise..the principles of management
..assess the validity of a contract
..judge the effectiveness of a contract in protecting against business risks.
..decide the effectiveness of different approaches to problem-solving, both in theory and in practice."

Source: John Buckle, Op.Cit., pp.31-36.

APPENDIX 7, COURSE SELECTORS' REQUIREMENTS.

Example 2 Course Selectors' Requirements

DEGREE COURSE IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

List of Competencies Required

1. HANDLING INFORMATION

   1.1 Retrieving information from library and other sources in relation to a particular purpose.

   1.2 Reading to extract information in relation to a particular purpose.

   1.3 Note-taking in order to summarise and record information from written and verbal sources.

   1.4 Interpreting and drawing conclusions from data in tabular and graphical form.

   1.5 Calculating in the four rules of arithmetic.

   1.6 Using common statistical concepts to describe and explain data.

   1.7 Using a computer to obtain information.

2 PRESENTING INFORMATION

   2.1 Communicating information in written form.

   2.2 Communicating information in oral form.

   2.3 Planning use of time in relation to completing a range of written communication.

3. ARGUMENTS AND ANALYSIS

   3.1 Analyzing an argument

   3.2 Using a theory to analyses an issue or problem.

   3.3 Analyzing disagreement between different theoretical positions on a particular issue.

Source: *Handbook for The Assessment of Experiential Learning*, Op.Cit., p.18.

APPENDIX 8, EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE.

Dear 6 November 1991

APEL PROJECT, 1991.

I hope you are well and that things have worked out for you since we last met. You will recall my recent note to you, trying to set up a meeting of the APEL Group to explore how individuals and the group more generally felt about APEL in the light of subsequent events. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to find a date that everyone can manage. We have therefore decided to resort to a questionnaire that I would be grateful if you would complete and return to the SCE in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope by **Monday the 25th of November**. It is obviously crucial to future planning that we get as much honest feedback from you as we can on how APEL worked, or didn't, for you. The information you provide is for research purposes only and will be treated in the strictest confidence.

In anticipation, many thanks for completing the enclosed. As explained in the questionnaire, I may wish to contact one or two of you to discuss your experiences over the telephone. I hope this is acceptable. If not would you please indicate this when you return the form.

With very best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

LINDEN.

QUESTIONNAIRE: THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF APEL, 1991.

(PLEASE NOTE THAT THE INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE WILL BE TREATED IN THE STRICTEST CONFIDENCE. RETURNED QUESTIONNAIRES WILL ONLY BE SEEN BY LINDEN WEST, THE APEL PROJECT DIRECTOR. THE INFORMATION WILL THEN BE AGGREGATED AND DISCUSSED (IN WAYS WHICH ENSURE ANONYMITY) BY THE APEL PLANNING GROUP. SOME OF THE INFORMATION WILL ALSO BE USED, AS APPROPRIATE, IN THE PROJECT REPORT FOR THE LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE TRUST, THE BODY WHICH FINANCED THE PROJECT. WE WOULD BE GRATEFUL IF YOU COULD COMPLETE THE QUESTIONNAIRE BY MONDAY THE 25TH NOVEMBER AT THE LATEST AND RETURN IT TO THE SCE IN THE STAMPED, ADDRESSED ENVELOPE PROVIDED. WE HOPE THAT YOU WILL ALSO AGREE, IF NECESSARY, TO BEING CONTACTED BY TELEPHONE IF THERE ARE ANY FURTHER POINTS WE WISH TO RAISE WITH YOU. IF THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE WOULD YOU PLEASE INDICATE SO WHEN SENDING IN YOUR COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE).

1) Which diploma/degree did you apply for?

2) Did you get a place or are you doing something else? Please detail what you are now doing and how it relates to what you intended to do/hoped to do when you were selected for APEL?

3) i Were you called for interview? .....

.....

ii How did the interview compare with what you expected as a result of APEL and the interview simulation exercise?

iii Did your interviewer seem aware of the APEL course and your participation in the programme?

iv Did the interviewer make use of your material/essay/portfolio? What did you think of the interviewer and his/her preparation? Please comment in detail.

v What did you think of the interview itself as a vehicle to assess your suitability at that time for higher education?

4 In retrospect, was the APEL process of value? It might be useful to begin by specifying one good aspect of APEL and one aspect you feel might be improved.

5 Are there any other points you wish to make about the APEL process which you feel might be helpful to the SCE and the wider University in planning similar initiatives in the future? Your points could be listed under the following headings (please continue on a separate sheet if necessary):

i The initial interview

ii The APEL course

iii The admissions procedure in general

iv Any other comments.

Thank you for your help in completing this questionnaire.

LINDEN WEST

NOVEMBER, 1991.